

THIRST:  
A Journey into Terroir

*A work of creative non-fiction*

Tracing Place: A Study of the Literature of Land Reclaimed

*Critical thesis*

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A thesis submitted to the School of Literature and Creative Writing, University of East Anglia, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

*Thirst: A Journey into Terroir* and ‘Tracing Place: A Study of the Literature of Land Reclaimed’

Judy O’Kane 2019

This thesis in Creative and Critical Writing comprises two parts. The creative work, *Thirst: A Journey into Terroir*, is a creative response to the concept of terroir, wine’s particular sense of place. *Thirst* expands the concept of terroir, and considers it as an expression of the poetics of place. A work of creative non-fiction, *Thirst* traces my route into wine beginning in Central Otago in the South Island of New Zealand to the viticultural and monastic traditions of Burgundy. *Thirst* considers place itself as a receptacle of knowledge within and beyond viticulture.

The second part is a critical thesis considering the role of place in three contemporary works of creative non-fiction: *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance*, *The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking*, and *The Outrun*. The thesis examines how the three writers trace their bearings within place through art, history and literature. Both parts of this thesis propose place itself as a receptacle of memory.

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## Thesis introduction

The creative and critical works comprising this thesis are connected both thematically and generically. For a start, both are broadly speaking a study of place. The creative work, *Thirst*, considers the concept of terroir. Brian Sommers, geographer, defines terroir in the following terms:

*Terroir* is French for ‘ground’ or ‘soil,’ but it is more than that. It is used to describe all the local features of environment and society that have an effect on wine. Many people believe that all the features of a place taken as a whole – its *terroir* – have a distinctive influence that you can taste in the wine. This is what it means to taste geography.<sup>1</sup>

*Thirst* is a creative response to this concept, and considers terroir as a way of understanding place. *Thirst*, in common with the texts within the critical study seeks to understand what it means to belong to a place.

The critical thesis considers how three writers, de Waal, Laing and Liptrot negotiate and come to terms with place within three very different contexts. We might say that the critical thesis considers the ‘terroir’ of place without the wine.

Terroir is concerned with defining place, and this thesis considers how one place borders on the next. The critical thesis notes how the three writers are politically aware, although the texts are not political works per se. The creative work is conscious too of the political backdrop to place. As I learned what grapes originate where, and where they are permitted to grow, I was streets away from Immigration Enforcement in London Bridge. I was mindful of the ongoing discourse over the right to remain, and this informed the writing as a right of way, a path through place. Place within both the creative and critical texts is explored as the way in and the way out. The Brexit negotiations become a backdrop to the thesis to the extent that the submission date is the date the UK is to exit the European Union.

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<sup>1</sup> Somers, Brian, *The Geography of Wine* (New York: Plume, 2008), p. 19.

The critical study considers how each of the three texts is cognisant of the boundaries between writer and place. Each work within the critical study might be considered as a form of the writer gaining a sense of awareness, proprioception. I had two orthopaedic operations in the course of the thesis, and the creative work began to explore regaining my bearings within place as I worked on physiotherapy proprioception exercises.

The critical essay explores the three writers' tracing, writing or re-writing place. Each work is a particularly bespoke study of place. As a potter and academic de Waal is conscious of the artistic and historical context of each space, whereas Laing as an editor and writer is concerned with the lives of six alcoholic writers as she traces their paths across America. Liptrot reflects on familial medical history as well as the unique, and inherently dangerous, features of the islands of Orkney, considering place in the natural world as she makes her way back to sobriety. The gaze of each writer is informed by a quest. Both creative and critical works consider how place accepts or rejects, even how place nourishes the self as each writer traces a path back to the tribe, within familial or literary contexts. While all three texts involve exile or exclusion, the thesis considers these traverses of place as a form of celebration rather than a lament. Place, within the critical and creative works, is considered as an organic, evolving archive.

The gaze in *Thirst* is informed by wine, as I learn what will survive where and why, considering terroir as potentially hospitable ground. The gaze is affected also by my legal background as I seek to understand place. The law asks particular questions of place in defining personal and political identity. *Thirst* considers, for example, how the law defines domicile, in part, by where one intends to be buried. The creative text and the three texts within the critical essay are therefore informed by the particular gaze of the writer. To extend the terroir metaphor, we could say that just as a wine of terroir could only come from a particular place, these texts could only come from these particular writers.

The two parts of my thesis are also generically connected. The critical essay explores the issue of genre, and the three texts all fall to some extent within the broad church of biography in its widest sense, as well as creative non-fiction. Meanwhile *Thirst*

has been shortlisted for the Tony Lothian Award for first uncommissioned biography.

The creative work *Thirst* first began in the Biography and Creative Non-Fiction MA at the University of East Anglia. Early passages were written as part of the MA programme, and an extract from *The Rocket House* was published by UEA, Creative Writing Anthologies, 2012. *The Silverado Trail* was published in the Listowel Writers' Week Anthology, 2015. Various extracts of the work have been published in different forms, including *Doubtful Sound*, published by Landfall, Autumn 2016, *Elsie* and *Monkfish*, published by Guernsey Literary Festival, 2017. An earlier version of an extract was published by the Katherine Mansfield Society. *The Rocket House* has been published as part of the Charles Causley Poetry Competition 2018. On London Bridge was published in *The North*. Early extracts have been published in the *World of Fine Wine*, *Alquimie*, *Fire & Knives*, thejournal.ie, and on Himmelsfeld Winery's website. Sections are published in the *Manchester Review* and as part of the *Irish Times* Generation Emigration series.

*Thirst* is a work of creative non-fiction. The chronology of events has been altered at various stages within the text.

## Part I

### Tracing Place: A Study of the Literature of Land Reclaimed



## 1. Introduction

This study considers the treatment of *place* within three contemporary works of creative non-fiction: *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, *The Trip to Echo Spring* and *The Outrun*.<sup>2</sup> These are three very different texts which have, to my knowledge, never been curated or considered together. *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is the story of Edmund de Waal's journey of discovery from Japan to Paris and Vienna as he follows the path of his ancestors, through tracing the fate of the netsuke, his inheritance. *The Trip to Echo Spring* is the story of Olivia Laing's journey across the United States in the wake of six writers who struggled with alcoholism. Meanwhile, it is her own alcoholism that draws Amy Liptrot back home to Orkney in *The Outrun*.

This critical study examines the concept of terroir within a literary rather than viticultural context and considers 'placeness' within each text. A wine of terroir is said to be an expression of the land where it grew, and this study examines three texts as expressions – but also evocations, and figurations – of place. As the title suggests, I am interested in the writers' *tracing* of place, to include the *literature* of and from place, and how each work asserts a *re-claiming* of place.

The last decade has witnessed an enormous growth within the creative non-fiction genre, with first person narratives exploring everything from grief the Irish border.<sup>3</sup> Creative non-fiction is a broad church, which is recognised in terms of diverse prizes from The Bailie Gifford Prize for non-fiction, the Wellcome Book Prize for works concerning health,<sup>4</sup> the Costa Biography Prize and the Slightly Foxed Prize for biography.<sup>5</sup> Within this rapidly expanding genre there has been a marked growth of

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund de Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (London: Vintage, 2011), Olivia Laing, *The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking* (London: Canongate, 2014), Amy Liptrot, *The Outrun* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* (London: Vintage, 2014), and Garrett Carr, *The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland's Border* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> *The Outrun* was shortlisted for the Wellcome Prize in 2016.

<sup>5</sup> *The Hare* won the Costa prize in 2010.

works exploring place. Granta's contribution to the discourse, for example, includes *The New Nature Writing*, *Exit Strategies*, *Travel*, *The Map is not the Territory*, *What Have we Done?*, *No Man's Land* and *Journeys*.<sup>6</sup> Universities offer courses on place and nature writing. The Wainwright prize is offered for works exploring nature, the outdoors and UK travel, and the Ondaadje prize is awarded for a work of literature evoking the spirit of a place.

Place, as this study will explore, is not simply a setting. Philip Marsden considers Heidegger's thoughts on this point: "'Dwelling" for Heidegger meant much more than just living in a house. It described a way of being in the world.'<sup>7</sup> This study considers how these writers gain an understanding of 'being in the world'. Through close analysis of their texts I consider how these writers take their bearings from place. This raises generic questions too. Barrie Jean Borich takes up the theme of 'placeness' in considering what she terms 'autogeography':

An autogeography is a self-portrait in the form of a panoramic map of memory, history, lyric intuition, awareness of sensory space, research and any other object or relic we pick up along the way that offers further evidence of what does or did or will happen here.<sup>8</sup>

Autogeography is one of several hybrid categories within creative non-fiction, which includes also autogeology, biography of place, even autobiography of place. Macfarlane's *The Old Ways* proposes 'biogeography' as a sub-category within this genre, quoting from Walter Benjamin's memoir, exploring how he 'played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life – bios – graphically on a map', and Macfarlane too plays with this idea: 'not an act of biography exactly, but perhaps one of

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<sup>6</sup> Jason Cowley, ed. *Granta: The New Nature Writing*, (London: Granta, 2008); John Freeman, ed. *Granta: Exit Strategies*, (London: Granta, 2012); John Freeman, ed. *Granta: Travel*, (London: Granta, 2013); Sigrid Rausing, ed. *Granta: The Map is not the Territory*, (London: Granta, 2015); Sigrid Rausing, ed. *Granta: What Have we Done?*, (London: Granta, 2015); Sigrid Rausing, ed. *Granta: No Man's Land*, (London: Granta, 2016) and Sigrid Rausing, ed. *Granta: Journeys*, (London: Granta, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Philip Marsden, *Rising Ground: A Search for the Spirit of Place* (London: Granta, 2015), p.20. What this study terms 'placeness', Tim Dee considers as *place-ness* of place; Tim Dee, ed., *Ground Work: Writings on Places and People* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018). Barrie Jean Borich, cited below, terms it 'placiness'.

<sup>8</sup> Barrie Jean Borich, 'Autogeographies', in *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, ed by Margot Singer and Nicole Walker (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 97 - 101 (p.99).

biogeography'.<sup>9</sup> I will demonstrate how the three texts within this study possess what Macfarlane in his introduction to *The Living Mountain*, Nan Shepherd's exploration of the Cairngorms, terms 'generic disobedience'.<sup>10</sup> What this study examines is the fluidity within which these texts wander in and out of and between genres.

Beyond questions of genre, this study considers how the three writers *read*, even *translate* place: *The Outrun*, for example, opens, in addition to the map we see in all three texts, with a glossary of local language. Throughout, I am mindful of each writer's intimate knowledge of place. Katherine Swift's *The Morville Hours*, a meditative exploration of a monastic garden, speaks of this closeness: 'I like this feeling of intimacy, this close looking, this sense of time extending.'<sup>11</sup> It is appropriate in encountering such texts to match intimacy for intimacy. What follows is not a grand theory of place: it would be paradoxical for it to be so. Instead, I propose this study as a close reading of three texts which are in turn three close readings of place. I explore local features of each, examining the ways place is moved through, narratively, and the ways it is rendered, descriptively and figuratively. I track through each work, identifying in a fairly methodical fashion, its key aspects, and, as the thesis proceeds, comparing and contrasting these. We might think of my own writing *and* that of those authors whom I read, as a kind of *tracing*.

### ***Tracing place***

This study considers the very particular way in which each writer traces place. The Oxford English Dictionary defines trace as: 'vestiges or marks remaining and indicating the former presence, existence'. I will explore how each of the three journeys is taken in search of evidence of others.

Trace is also defined as: 'path', 'way', 'road', and I explore the various pathways taken and re-taken by the writers. Macfarlane's *The Old Ways* cites Thomas Clark:

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways* (Edinburgh: Penguin, 2013), p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Macfarlane, 'Introduction' in Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), p. xiii.

<sup>11</sup> Katherine Swift, *The Morville Hours* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 81.

‘Always, everywhere people have walked, veining the earth with paths visible and invisible’.<sup>12</sup> This study explores how the writers trace and track these veins, by foot and by rail, and by air, Laing descending into airports, de Waal returning to the same sites: ‘It is April again and I am back in the Palais.’<sup>13</sup>

Tracing, we might say, extends to overwriting, superimposing one map on another, and all three writers use place as a means by which to examine themselves. Tracing place, as I will show, is not simply a form of observation, but a form of searching, sensing, listening, observing. This study considers each writer’s sensory engagement with place. Yi-Fu, cultural geographer, considers the importance of the senses within place:

In English, “I see” means, “I understand.” [...] Are the senses of smell and touch informed by mentality? We tend to slight the cognitive power of these senses. Yet the French verb “savoir” (to know) is closely related to the English “savour”. Taste, smell, and touch [...] discriminate among the wealth of sensations and articulate gustatory, olfactory, and textural worlds.<sup>14</sup>

As Yi-Fu sets out therefore, ‘seeing’ is a form of understanding. Each writer ‘sees’ place within a cultural and social context, the writers offering visually descriptive images. Each writer sets out to trace terrain (both literal and metaphorical) over which they have particular authority (for de Waal it is the world of art history and the diaspora; for Laing, the literary world, and alcoholism within it; for Liptrot the archipelago and the worlds of her alcoholism and recovery). Later in the study I will explore how each writer figures as a ‘seer’, representing place as beyond reach. In de Waal’s lyrical descriptions, for example, he evokes his ancestors within place, in an almost aboriginal way, imagining himself inhabiting these spaces with his ancestors.

The dictionary definition extends to ‘a line or figure drawn’ and I will explore how each of the texts is concerned with the outline or the *borders* of place. In very

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<sup>12</sup> Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 172.

<sup>14</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p.10.

different ways, the writers define place with reference to boundaries. To trace a map is to re-write, or to copy the outlines of place. De Waal observes architectural patterns within place, then the geopolitical boundaries of borders. Place is demarcated by station names in Laing's work, and the borders of the *Outrun* borders are represented by physical geography in the friction between sea and land.

I explore the physicality of the writers' tracing. For de Waal, tracing is particularly *textural* as he *touches* the netsuke, the tapestries, the artefacts of place, in search of his ancestors: 'there must be a trace of them somewhere', physically engaging with the artefacts of place, even works of art, and becomes textual with his searching of archival documents.<sup>15</sup> This tracing therefore is also textual as well as textural; it is interested in the texts of place: maps and guidebooks, public records and the literary canon.

Tracing is more *textual* than textural for Laing, whose pathway is guided by the literary works of the six writers, the texts themselves drawing her across the United States, to the places the writers wrote of and wrote from. These works were marked up (traced) as exam texts, as though she offers a braille reading of place.

Liptrot's tracing too is both textual and textural. She offers sensual descriptions of water as well as land as she traces Orkney's coastline. And *text* within *The Outrun* is represented as technology as well as paper as she offers images of herself typing from an upturned bucket on the family farm.

I consider too the tactful engagement as a respectful occupation, and later I will explore how this at times strays into pilgrimage. This tracing is conscious of the layered quality of place, sensitive to the previous inhabitants. Philip Marsden's *Rising Ground* considers this reverence, citing Diana Eck's work on sacred geography and Hinduism: 'Thousands of years of individual visits have embedded reverence: "This "imagined landscape" has been constituted [...] by countless missions of pilgrims who have generated a powerful sense of land, location and

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<sup>15</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 47.

belonging through journeys.”<sup>16</sup> The writers within this study are mindful of the ‘embedded reverence’ – and this reverence too can have textual properties: in chapter one of this study I consider the layered quality of place in de Waal’s writing as a form of palimpsest. This prompts me to examine how each of these journeys forms a further *layer* of engagement within the cultural and historical context of place, and how this tracing forms part of the canon: the texts taking their place as the title of the study suggests, within the literature of place.

### **Quests, Journeys, Pilgrimages, and other ways of moving through place**

My own tracing of these texts necessarily takes in structural and generic as well as thematic questions. To some extent, each text structures itself as a quest, a word which derives its roots from the Latin *quaere*, to seek. Macfarlane develops the idea of place as a source we might approach in search of answers:

For some time now it has seemed to me that the two questions we should ask of any strong landscape are these: firstly, what do I know when I am in this place that I can know nowhere else? And then, vainly, what does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself.<sup>17</sup>

These questions are germane to the quest and speak to the inner journey, the question that launched the quest, but beyond that, they explore place as a receptacle of knowledge.

All three writers in this study are British; their quest takes them *away*. ‘There are some subjects one can’t address at home’, says Laing as she embarks on a trip through America seeking to make sense of the link (if any) between writers and alcoholism and to exorcise childhood memories of alcoholism of a family member.<sup>18</sup> It is Liptrot’s own alcoholism however that drives Liptrot home to Orkney, to continue her journey into sobriety. This study considers how the quest form offers a fresh gaze at place through the eyes of the stranger. Even though Liptrot returns

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<sup>16</sup> Marsden, *Rising Ground*, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Laing, *The Trip*, p. 6.

home to Orkney her complicated relationship with the island gives her a sense of ‘otherness’. All three writers see place afresh, as Proust would have it, they see place with new eyes.

But while the quest provides a helpful generic framework, there is a non-epic quality to these writers’ engagement with place. Lauren Elkin’s *Flâneuse* quotes Perec: “‘Space is a doubt [...]. I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It’s never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it.’<sup>19</sup> This study however will demonstrate how none of the writers in this study seeks to ‘own’ or ‘conquer’ place. Andrew O’Hagan said, of Robert Burns’ poetry, that he sought ‘not to capture the moment but to ordain it’.<sup>20</sup> I suggest that each of these writers *ordains* the everyday within three very different locations. Jason Cowley’s introduction to *The New Nature Writing* seizes on the importance of the ordinary: ‘Many of the stories in this issue are studies in the local or the parochial: they are about the ordinary of exoticism in the familiar, the extraordinary the ordinary. They are about new ways of seeing’.<sup>21</sup> This study proposes the three works in this study as rich, poetic explorations of the everyday.

Here, certain comparisons are helpful. In contrast to the hyper-physical engagement of some nature writers: walking or climbing (Macfarlane), even surfing (Winton), these texts offer a quiet observing. I consider how this quiet observance itself becomes part of the literature of place and explore the everyday occupation of these three writers. I will argue, however, that these are not passive engagements with place as the quest informs the gaze, the sensory always feeding the scholarly, the quest and the questions of place. And it is this quiet attention, the quiet but insistent return of the gaze to place, almost like a mantra, that sets these works apart from much of the literature of place.

Because of the quietness and everyday quality of these narratives, we must start to entertain other names for them. If there *is* something of the romance of the quest about each of these texts, we must also say that they are *journeys* in a more ordinary

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<sup>19</sup> Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016), p. 286.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew O’Hagan in conversation at London Review Bookshop, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Cowley, ed. *Granta: The New Nature Writing*, pp.10-11.

sense. Each of the texts depicts a very particular journey. Indeed motion is suggested within each title: *Hare* suggests a chase, representing de Waal's journey *following* his exiled ancestors, who were in turn chased out of Vienna. In *Trip* (noun) a jaunt is suggested, involving pleasure, but the verb suggests a pattern of instability: falling, failing. And *Outrun* is place name but speaks too to the writer's flight home, her flight further and further out to the edge of the archipelago.

Each text can also be considered a retreat, suggesting a re-tracing of steps. I will consider retreat as both spiritual and therapeutic. To put it another way again, each journey takes place to some extent within a pilgrim route, attentive to those who went before. This writer's occupation is silent, reflective, even respectful. Each writer is conscious of its ability to retain memory, and conscious of the previous inhabitants of place: the dead. Place is often represented as a burial site, reinforcing the concept of place as a keeper of memory, even secrets.

This study will explore each journey as pilgrimage, secular pilgrimage and literary pilgrimage. As the title suggests, this study examines how these works themselves become traced into the literary canon. All three texts are what Richard Holmes termed 'footstepping' into a literary tradition; all three engage with earlier works of and from their terrain.<sup>22</sup>

These generic questions also have implications for how the writer is figured within and in relation to place. The three writers share a self-reflexive, questioning presence within place. This study does not offer not a psychogeographical reading of place, but is conscious that the works do share some ground with psychogeography.<sup>23</sup> Will Self's *Psychogeography*, the account of his 'walking' to New York, shares much ground with the writers, but differs markedly in voice.<sup>24</sup> The texts within this study share a modesty, and importantly a quiet lyrical voice which gives common ground to three ostensibly unrelated texts. All three writers, to varying degrees, represent

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<sup>22</sup> See Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (London: Harper Perennial, 2011, first published London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> For further reading, see for example, Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, (London: Verso, 2015), and Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Will Self, *Psychogeography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).



themselves as flaneur, retreatant and pilgrim. This study will consider how the writers are interested in wandering and wondering freely within place, however I will examine how the writers are more purposeful than the flaneur. While these writers describe *pleasure* within place, in sensory and sensual terms, I will show how they have none of the insouciance of the flaneur.

### ***The politics of place***

While it is not always to the fore, there is necessarily an ecological or geopolitical aspect to these contemporary instances of the tracing of place: each of my writers also traces the *loss* of place. They are concerned with both the finite and the infinite nature of place. The liminal space of Liptrot's borders is worried by the effects of the waves, while de Waal's work considers the vulnerability of place on a geopolitical level: 'I worry about visas, he doesn't', he says of his brother as trace their way back to Odessa, the source of the Ephrussi empire.<sup>25</sup> Observing how Czechoslovakia was subsumed by the Third Reich, de Waal is acutely aware of how place can disappear.

Each work considers contested space. The disputed territory in *The Hare* is the property of the Ephrussi clan while *The Outrun* explores the liminal space between land and sea.<sup>26</sup>

Although place is home only for Liptrot, each writer explores a form of kinship with place. Liptrot, for example compares her occupation of the archipelago to the tourists, or 'island baggers', as though their occupation is a form of trespass, while de Waal is anxious that his occupation too may constitute a trespass.

I explore the (re)connection between each writer and place. Tracing paths raises questions of rights of way. Each text proposes a claim over place, a right to occupy the spaces described. De Waal observes how 'The Ringstrasse is meant for strolling along [...] It is an easy stream of flowing people', and I will consider how each of

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<sup>25</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 336.

<sup>26</sup> In generic terms, this work falls into the burgeoning study of the 'blue humanities'. For an in-depth analysis of this issue, see Allen *et al*, eds. *Coastal Works*.

the texts represents a re-claiming of the writer's right to free movement within these spaces.<sup>27</sup>

These three works ask questions of what it means to belong, and what it means to be excluded from place. This entails an exploration of how the writers treat both the way *out of* and the way *into* place. Each writer is acutely aware of displacement: the exclusion and exile de Waal's ancestors, the nomadic, even vagrant lives of Laing's six writers and Liptrot's flight from London. Each writer explores how place itself rejects, even extrudes its population. Liptrot offers accounts of countless casualties which fell from the Outrun, and de Waal's images recall the exodus of populations across Europe. The writers share an anxiety concerning exits: when Laing offers an image of a fire exit in New Orleans she is gesturing towards the works of Tennessee Williams, but also to the flight of many of the six writers. De Waal's references to suitcases and his assertion that you keep your suitcase close at hand reinforce his anxiety around the issue of one's leave to remain.

Points of entry and exit are treated figuratively as well as literally within the three texts. This study explores the myriad access points: each writer traces the way in, de Waal exploring portals and vitrines, windows and doorways, Laing descending over cityscapes and Liptrot parting the seaweed underwater. I will explore how each work appears to ask: Are we *allowed* into this place?

The right to enter and occupy holds particular meaning for each of the writers. De Waal seems to exercise the right of entry by and on behalf of his family, correcting the insult of exile. The Orcadian coastline offers a continuous point of entry. *Coastal Works* asserts: 'Coastlines have always been powerful imaginative spaces', and this study explores how each of the territories under exploration is a powerful imaginative space.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 159

<sup>28</sup> Allen *et al*, eds. *Coastal Works*. p. 7.

I will begin by tracing de Waal's steps as he embarks on his journey. I'll then proceed in turn, to Laing and Liptrop. The structure of each chapter is the same – and this iterative structure allows me quietly to gather common features, and points of similarity between my texts. I begin by giving a brief account of the text's main thematic concerns, and the specific geographical locations it treats, and then introduce the autobiographical features of the writer. Their own writing then comes to the fore. I move on in each case to explore the literal and physical descriptions of place, before moving to its more figurative treatment: the way particular spatial features open up more metaphorical or metaphysical concerns. This takes us, then, to an exploration of how the writer situates him/herself in relation to the places s/he treats – personally, psychologically, aesthetically and so on – and so to consider the relation between place and person. In none of my texts can place be considered apart from time, so each chapter then moves on to a consideration of how time presses upon, and is figured in relation to, place in the specific text under consideration. And then lastly, I pull away from this close and attentive tracing of my texts, to situate them in relation to other works in the field, so as to consider their particular, quiet, intervention. As the thesis proceeds, the comparisons and contrasts gather. I'd like to suggest that what follows should be treated as something of a field guide to accompany you on your journeying.

## **2. The Hare with Amber Eyes: In Search of Lost Property**

### ***Place***

*The Hare with Amber Eyes* is the account of de Waal's tracing the movements of his ancestors across Mitteleuropa into exile. In 1991 he was given a scholarship to study pottery in Japan where he was introduced to a collection of netsuke, small intricately carved ornaments. The netsuke had been in his family's ownership since they were acquired by his great great uncle in Paris in the 1870s, and would provide de Waal with a means to trace his ancestors, the once wealthy Ephrussi dynasty. The netsuke were among the limited family possessions to escape appropriation by the Nazis and witnessed his family's progression across Europe, from Odessa to Paris, from Vienna to Japan and finally to England. *The Hare* is a story of diaspora and loss. The netsuke provide the narrative thread with de Waal's family's past; they also, as I shall show, allow for the connection with and exploration of place.

*The Hare* considers place as an expression of cultural identity. It covers over a century of family history from 1871 to 2009. De Waal observes the salon in 1870s Paris, where Charles entertained Proust and the Impressionists. In Vienna, the home of his great grandfather Viktor, the gaze becomes more political: the Ringstrasse is considered as a social and performative space before the arrival of the Third Reich. The narrative moves to Japan, tracing place through the life and artworks of his great-uncle Iggie. It follows de Waal's 'return' to Odessa, the homeplace of the Ephrussi dynasty, finishing in 2009 at de Waal's family home in London. De Waal describes place within a social and cultural context; in Iggie's Tokyo apartment, for example, he notes the peaceful cohabitation of artefacts from East and West, how the cultures have fused, in contrast to his brother's experience in Paris: 'Charles has walked, seemingly without effort, into the formidable, fashionable salons of the day, each of which was a minefield of fiercely contested geographies of political, artistic, religious and aristocratic taste.'<sup>29</sup> De Waal's evocation of place is also an evocation

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<sup>29</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 39.

of the tensions and contestations within place. The text is conscious that place can disappear and his writing is an attempt to trace what remains.

### ***The figure of the writer***

De Waal is an English potter with an academic post at the University of Westminster, and the most reluctant first-person narrator within this study – always marking his debts to others and effacing his own subjective presence to allow past stories to be heard. He offers a vote of thanks in the British Embassy at the end of his scholarship in Japan, and his occupation within each place throughout the text commemorates ancestors. As his uncle is laid to rest, he says: ‘my Japanese isn’t good enough when I need it. So instead, in this room in this Buddhist temple, in this Tokyo suburb, I say the Kaddish for Ignace von Ephrussi who is so far from Vienna, for his father and his mother, and for his brother and sisters in their diaspora.’<sup>30</sup> If he is self-effacing however, he is also a self-reflexive figure seeking to come to terms with his family’s exile and displacement. Recalling Macfarlane’s assertion that place *knows*, de Waal has important questions to ask of place. As he stands where his great-great grandfather’s library once stood in Vienna, he says: ‘How can I write about this time?’ He might well say: ‘Where is home?’, even, ‘Who am I?’<sup>31</sup>

### ***Depiction of Place***

The language throughout *The Hare* is highly descriptive, but never extravagant. De Waal as writer recalls the advice given to de Waal the potter: ‘Be careful, he would say, of the unwarranted gesture: less is more’, and the work is understated throughout.<sup>32</sup> De Waal is drawn to small details, such as the family’s ‘own coat of arms: an ear of corn and a heraldic boat with three masts and full sails’,<sup>33</sup> and the ‘chariots on the roof’<sup>34</sup> of the Ephrussi Palais. These details always signify more than

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

themselves: here they represent travel, the masts and full sails foregrounding the need to escape, and this is a theme which will recur throughout all three texts.

*The Hare* describes a rich sensory engagement with place, beginning with touch. We see repeated images of de Waal running his finger along threads and borders, even documents, tracing the path of his ancestors. Macfarlane notes how the visual artist Richard Long ‘signs off his letters with a red-ink stamp that shows the outline of two feet with eyes embedded in their soles, gazing out at the looker. *Footfall* as a way of seeing the landscape; touch as sight – these are notions to which I can hold.’<sup>35</sup> As a potter, however, de Waal however traces place with his fingers rather than his feet.

As a potter de Waal knows the importance of touch; touch offers a form of authentication. De Waal takes to carrying the netsuke in a pocket; a palpable, spiritual connection to place: a touchstone. As he holds one of the pieces he says: ‘I want to walk into each room where this object has lived, to feel the volume of the space, to know what pictures were on the walls, how the light fell from the windows.’<sup>36</sup>

Sight is also important: the text is rich in images of light. De Waal imagines Charles’s home ‘in the rue de Monceau, where he has recently laid down a golden Savonnerie carpet [...] I imagine walking across this floor. The whole room is golden.’<sup>37</sup> This light illuminates place for academic as well as aesthetic examination. Here, we observe the interaction between objects (the carpet) within place (the room) and the medium of looking (golden light) we are offered a version in miniature of the work of the *Hare*, where place is reflected on, and by, and reflects back to its observer. But there are undertones to this light: the images of opulence, gilt becoming *geld* portending antisemitism. De Waal reads reports of how ‘Jews vomited from all the ghettos of Europe’, suggesting place itself extruding its people.<sup>38</sup> These centres of enlightenment, the salons, move from centres of artistic and literary interest to contested spaces, ‘the salons had become infested with Jews

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<sup>35</sup> Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, p. 29.

<sup>36</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

and Jewesses', the juxtaposition of antisemitism and the salon (the epicentre of conversation, art and ideas) enables de Waal to reinforce this as contested space.<sup>39</sup>

Earlier we discussed how Yi-Fun considered 'seeing' as a form of 'understanding', and within de Waal's visual depiction of place we can observe a form of tracing. His eye is drawn to the configuration of *lines* within place. When Viktor reaches the safety of Kent, the detail of the herringbone path leading to the house suggests Viktor might gain purchase. But de Waal can almost *hear* as well as see place. From the Rue de Monceau he says: 'I used to draw buildings like this [...] you could see the rise and fall of the depth of the windows and pillars. There is something musical in this kind of elevation. You take classical elements and try to bring them into rhythmic life'.<sup>40</sup> This reading place in terms of *rhythm* is as sensory as it is scholarly and suggests an *aboriginal* ability to engage with the place of his ancestors. Macfarlane cites Chatwin: "each totemic ancestor, while travelling through the country, was thought to have scattered a trail of words and musical notes along the line of his footprints." Depending on where they fell, these foot-notes became linked with particular features of the landscape.<sup>41</sup> It is as though de Waal might put his ear to the ground to *divine* what is to follow: 'To be on the Vienna Ringstrasse was to be within earshot of a marching band.'<sup>42</sup>

Senses flood together, verging into synaesthesia: at once sensory, scholarly and spiritual. Of Charles's arrival in Paris de Waal says, 'If you want to taste this moment, taste the dust sweeping along the newly paved avenues and across the bridges, look at the two paintings of Gustave Caillebotte,' the moment not just felt, but *tasted*.<sup>43</sup> Even sound extends beyond sound: in Iggie's home 'the netsuke are washed late at night by waves of Gounod's Faust, played loud', the netsuke *cared for, bathed* like children.<sup>44</sup> It is as though de Waal has a super-sensory ability to *taste, feel, and hear*, each sense tracing the placeness of the homes of his ancestors.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 21

<sup>41</sup> Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 115.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

### *Figuration of place*

Alongside the sensory apprehension of place, de Waal uses several key figures to represent it. The netsuke themselves, who figure both in the title and the book cover, hand crafted from wood and ivory, are ‘of’ Japan. But they speak too of the places they have occupied. These ‘little explosions of exactitude’ enable de Waal to move from a micro to a macro examination of place.

The vitrine however is de Waal’s portal *into* place and frames his journey. ‘I want to be able to reach to the handle of the door and turn it and feel it open’, says de Waal, and the vitrine enables him to direct the view inwards, to the netsuke, to his family.<sup>45</sup> The figure extends to doors and windows, delineating private and public space. At pivotal moments the door closes. Charles, for example ‘was a mondain with doors shut in his face’.<sup>46</sup> The vitrine opens, exposing the family to danger, as ‘The Ephrussi family come up again and again. It is as if a vitrine is opened and each of them is taken out and held up for abuse.’<sup>47</sup> The vitrine represents a vulnerable point of access. The day the Third Reich breach the threshold, the footman at the Palais does not attend for duty. The vitrine represents too the shifting border between private and public property, the Third Reich encroaching across Europe.

As well as a vulnerable point of access, the vitrine offers a protective layer to the figures of his ancestors themselves. We might compare the vitrine to Helen Macdonald’s figure of the camera lens in *H is for Hawk*. Macdonald’s father, a professional photographer, viewed the lens as a protective layer between self and other, and the vitrine offers de Waal similar protection. De Waal considers the vitrine as a hinge between past and present. He reviews his student manifesto, an essay declaiming the limitations of the vitrine: ‘Vitrines were a sort of coffin: things need to be out and to take their chances away from the protection of formal display, to be liberated’, as he revises his relationship to art, his family’s acquisitions (and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 92.



confiscations).<sup>48</sup> The vitrine enables de Waal to reframe *the story* of his ancestors. By offering images of the vitrine in intimate space of Emmy's dressing room, a safe space within which the children played, he converts the narrative from loss to a form of witnessing, the vitrine curating the netsuke that witnessed his family.

If the vitrine serves as a hinge both separating and joining place, the motif of thread is also used to *join* place. De Waal says: 'As I pack the ties away, I notice that they map his holidays with Jiro in London and Paris, Honolulu and New York.'<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the text there are images of joining together, even Manet's gesture of thanks for a commission from Charles: 'It was a single asparagus stalk laid across a table with an accompanying note: "This seems to have slipped from the bundle."' <sup>50</sup> The images of thread speak to the narrative thread, but they present the salon as the intersection of cultural and artistic life in Paris, where 'Charles hung on the walls of his study a suite of tapestries [...] woven from silver thread.'<sup>51</sup> The images of ribbons on the golden carpet, the silver and golden thread suggest beauty, a period of artistic enlightenment. De Waal cites Whistler: 'On any given canvas the colours must, so to speak, be embroidered on; that is, the same colour must reappear at intervals, like a single thread in an embroidery'.<sup>52</sup> Here, the thread is functional as well as aesthetic. In de Waal's hands we might consider the thread as suture; it is as though he is repairing the tableau of history. As he stands in modern day Vienna de Waal notes how 'the Palais is now opposite a tram stop above an underground station pushing people out', his gaze registering a population being extruded from the earth, and I suggest that de Waal himself is performing a surgical repair on the wounds suffered by place.<sup>53</sup>

The threads intersect to form a tapestry laid down across place, just as Charles 'has recently laid down a golden Savonnerie carpet'.<sup>54</sup> As well as his own descriptions de Waal evokes Zola and Proust, offering further descriptive layers of literary accounts

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 54

of the period. The poet Laforgue, Charles's secretary, speaks of 'your room where the note of a yellow armchair bursts out'.<sup>55</sup> The opulent yellow even catches the eye of Oscar Wilde: "*Pour écrire, il me faut de satin jaune*", he writes in his Paris journal – 'To write I need yellow satin.'<sup>56</sup>

Layer upon layer of thread emerges – and this layering of periods of history within a place also translates into the figure of the palimpsest. From the threads of carpets and tapestries to the dust observed everywhere from Paris to Vienna to Odessa (dust: the very stuff of place itself) forms sedimentary layers within this palimpsest. There is a particularly scholarly as well as sensory function to this palimpsest as de Waal considers documents of public record:

I go to the Jewish archive [...] to check up on the details of a marriage. I [...] find Viktor, and there is an official red stamp across his first name. It reads 'Israel'. An edict decreed that all Jews had to take new names. Someone has gone through every single name in the lists of Viennese Jews and stamped them: 'Israel' for the men, 'Sara' for the women.  
[...] The family is not erased, but written over.<sup>57</sup>

Place is a palimpsest from which the trace of the Ephrussi family has been removed. Then place itself unfurls and re-constitutes itself. When 'the lightly shaded areas on the map of Czechoslovakia are to be handed over by 1<sup>st</sup> October 1938 [...] The government in Prague is not present as their country is dismembered', an echo of Whistler's 'single thread'.<sup>58</sup> As de Waal reads Viktor's passport, this too becomes a palimpsest: 'On 13<sup>th</sup> May the stamp [...] "Passport holder is an emigrant." [...] On 18<sup>th</sup> May, is the stamp [...] "good for a single journey."<sup>59</sup> Like place, the passport entirely loses its identity.

### *The writer's engagement with place*

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

One time-honoured figure of a person moving through places is that of the flaneur – and de Waal certainly *represents* a flaneur (in the person of Charles) in his account. There is pleasure in this journey, raising other generic possibilities – and in particular the question of writer as flaneur. He makes his way ‘from the Hotel Ephrussi at what I consider to be a good flaneurial pace’, but de Waal himself is no flaneur.<sup>60</sup> Rather this is a figure he invokes. References to flaneurs speak to the spirit of Paris of the 1870s, but they also foreground the prohibitions on movement that will follow. In World War I, the population comes to a halt: ‘Vienna now seems to have two speeds. One is the pace of marching soldiers, children racing alongside, and the other is stand-still [...] standing in line’.<sup>61</sup> Then with the arrival of the Third Reich, Viktor ‘cannot go into the Sacher, he cannot go into the café Griensteidl, he cannot go into the Central, or go to the Prater, or to his bookshop, cannot go to the barber, cannot walk through the park. He cannot go on a tram’.<sup>62</sup> *The Hare* asks what it means to be forced out of your home, how ‘it is possible to go in you with your wealth and citizenship and depart a few hours later with only a permit to leave’.<sup>63</sup> It asks what it means renounce your possessions and citizenship; what it means to be of a place, what it means to live in exile. De Waal considers the exclusion and exile of his family, and the journey represents a quest for reinstatement.

As with the other texts, this is a quest narrative. The hero sets out: ‘I am away, my assistants say when people ring, and cannot be reached. Yes, a big project. He will return your call.’<sup>64</sup>

If the work is a quest, then it is also, more obviously, a sort of biography. We note how de Waal displays traits of the biographer’s anxiety, mindful of his ‘vagabonding’ the intimate places occupied by his family: Emmy’s dressing room, Viktor’s library. De Waal speaks of ‘vagabonding’ in relation to his ancestors’ acquisitions, such as ‘their vagabonding after old books [...] or the next good grain

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 189.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

deal'.<sup>65</sup> The term suggests of a lack of consent, or at least to an inequality of bargaining power. He cites the word frequently of his own search. 'I think of my "vagabonding" around the Rue de Monceau',<sup>66</sup> he says, as though his vagabonding is a form of trespass. His unease persists: 'I have the slightly clammy feeling of biography, the sense of living on the edges of other people's lives without their permission.'<sup>67</sup> It is worth considering how these manifestations of anxiety around consent stand in stark contrast to the unquestioning acquisition of the family's property by the Nazis as they 'search' or ransack the library in the Palais: 'Searching means this: every single drawer is wrenched open'.<sup>68</sup>

If we are to consider *The Hare* a biography, I suggest that it extends the boundaries to a deeper study of place itself. I suggest that *The Hare* might be considered autogeography as place offers answers to this very personal quest.

This journey is also a return. When de Waal returns to Odessa, he is standing at the 'source' of his family. Yi-Fu explores this form of tracing as a 'return':

Going up a river to its source is to return, symbolically, to the beginning of one's own life [...] Hence, although exploration for the explorer is a thrust into virgin territory, he experiences the move into the heart of a continent as a return to ancient roots, to a country once know but long since forgotten.<sup>69</sup>

This journey sees de Waal's return to the very source of his creation. This return we might also consider as form of retreat: de Waal retraces his own steps again and again: 'It is April and I am back in the Palais'.<sup>70</sup> It can be read also as a spiritual or therapeutic retreat: 'I am in Vienna, 400 yards across a small park from the front door to Freud's apartment, outside my paternal family home, and I cannot see

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>69</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 126.

<sup>70</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 172.

clearly'.<sup>71</sup> However, this retreat takes de Waal into a very populated space, setting it at odds with texts such as *Walden*, Thoreau's retreat into solitude.<sup>72</sup>

This therapeutic retreat is a form of proprioception, as de Waal regains spatial awareness within place. We observe him feeling his way into place: 'There is nothing to grip onto with these marbled surfaces. Its lack of tactility makes me panic [...] This is aggressively golden, aggressively lacking in purchase',<sup>73</sup> the marble speaking to his own struggle to graft himself onto the places occupied by his ancestors.

There are also elements of pilgrimage, as de Waal pays respects at the family grave in Paris, and says Kaddish for Iggy in Japan. As he advances across Europe he is asserting his right to occupy the places from which his family were excluded, and this occupation becomes quietly and personally political. De Waal is conscious of his family's struggle to gain tenure, 'Maurice, the owner of a vast château at Fontainebleau, put himself down on his marriage [certificate] to Beatrice de Rothschild as 'landowner', rather than banker. This was no slip', says de Waal, 'For Jews, owning land was still a comparatively new experience: it was only since the Revolution that Jews had full citizenship'.<sup>74</sup> These questions of the exile extend beyond his own family to the Jewish race; *The Hare* asks questions of how the human tribe occupies place.

### ***Temporality of place***

Earlier we considered the layered quality to de Waal's engagement with place, and this layering is seen also in the treatment of time. As the image of the palimpsest suggests, *The Hare* offers a blended treatment of place and time – a treatment marked in the narrative voice of the text.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>72</sup> It is worth noting also that *The Hare* is silent on the details of the journeys within this quest. The text, like Chatwin's *Songlines*, makes no reference to any travelling companions (if any there are) with the exception of his brother in Odessa.

<sup>73</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 125.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

In conversation with Penelope Lively at the Royal Society of Literature, de Waal reflected on his use of the present tense: ‘I had put this great carapace around the story [...] to write it as it happened’.<sup>75</sup> He considered also the temporal fluidity within the narrative: ‘I felt I had to move between tenses. I was trying to inhabit not just these rooms but actually these people [...] I had to be there with them’. The blent tenses lend a layered quality to the journey: ‘It is November and I need to go to Odessa. It is nearly two years since I began this journey and I’ve been everywhere else but the city where the Ephrussi family started’.<sup>76</sup> As de Waal journeys from Paris to Vienna and back, months become years. Time therefore layers over itself, and might be compared for example to Baker’s *The Peregrine*, where several years are compressed into one.<sup>77</sup>

Lia Purpura’s essay, *Why Some Hybrids Work and Others Don’t* also considers the nuanced treatment of time: ‘Hybrid tenses work because they help us bend time’, she says, citing what the poet Marvin Bell terms the “posthumous present.”<sup>78</sup> In the context of a literary exploration of place, I suggest Purpura’s ‘posthumous present’ might be considered a ‘present presence’, the writer’s presence heightened by the immediacy afforded by the present tense. When he says ‘Viktor signs it away [...] the accumulation of all the diligence of the family, a hundred years of possessions’, the present tense lends immediacy to the insult.<sup>79</sup> The present tense allows de Waal to place himself inside the room with his ancestors: ‘And while this is going on, their erstwhile owners are having their ribs broken and teeth knocked out’.<sup>80</sup> This immediacy is earned.

Returning to the sensory aspect of de Waal’s tracing, to touch: you could say that it is impossible to touch the past. For an art scholar, time speaks to authenticity: de Waal is constantly tracing the past, seeking evidence of his ancestors’ occupation, ‘There must be a trace of their hands somewhere’.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Royal Society of Literature, May 2010.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>77</sup> J.A. Baker, *The Peregrine* (London: Collins, 2010, first published 1967).

<sup>78</sup> Lia Purpura, ‘Why Some Hybrids Work and Others Don’t’, in *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, pp.13-14.

<sup>79</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 251.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

Time operates at a number of levels within the text. Time speaks to artistic and architectural movements, such as the Impressionists. As he traces his family history onto a historical chronology dates are offered: 'By 1860s the family had become the greatest grain-exporters in the world'.<sup>82</sup> De Waal studies a photograph of his great-great grandmother: 'It is winter 1906 in a Viennese street and she is talking to an archduke [...] She is wearing a pin-striped costume [...] It is a walking costume [...] To dress for that walk down Herrengasse would have taken an hour and a half'.<sup>83</sup> Here, just as movement within the Ringstrasse operated at two levels, de Waal considers time within domestic and public contexts.

De Waal captures the fragility of place and time: 'Most of Charles's pictures were of the country, of the fast-moving clouds and wind in the trees that spoke to his feeling for the disappearing moment', as he portrays place both as ephemeral and a permanent record.<sup>84</sup>

The Ephrussi's arrival within Paris and Vienna is contextualised within a time of possibility; everywhere there is dust, 'so of the minute'. Dust speaks to construction, beginnings, and conversely to human mortality: *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust*. The narrative speaks to both the beginning and the end of time. De Waal moves seamlessly from the physical to the metaphysical, observing how 'Vienna was demolished into a great city'.<sup>85</sup> Paris, de Waal says 'is like the start of the world', with 'the glare of newly dressed stone'.<sup>86</sup> This offers a stark contrast to the arrival of the Gestapo: 'They come into the library and tip the globes from their stands',<sup>87</sup> the upturned globes representing the end of time.

The historical dateline hovers over the text, a quiet juxtaposition of the personal and the political. This journey into memory, his study of private as well as historical artefacts, enables de Waal to revise history (his-story): 'all these things, a world of

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

things – a family geography stretching from Odessa’,<sup>88</sup> reinstating this ‘family geography’ within historical and cultural contexts. *The Hare* is de Waal’s correction to the insult of redacted records and cancelled passports. *The Hare* enables de Waal to curate the past as biographer, historian and art historian. De Waal recognises the figure of his great-great uncle in the background of Renoir’s *Le Déjeuner des canotiers*, and observes ‘Charles Ephrussi enters art history’.<sup>89</sup> De Waal says, ‘Proust notices Charles,’ and with this short sentence he quietly observes his family’s presence within a literary as well as historical context.

### *The place of the text*

We have considered this text’s singular writing of place. But what, then, is its place? In what traditions should we situate it? *The Hare* was published quietly in 2010. The reviewers, although almost invariably enthusiastic, reached no consensus as to genre; many called it a ‘book’, although the terms ‘memoir’, ‘biography’ and ‘meditation’, ‘history’, ‘art’ and ‘Judaism’ appeared in the discourse. Veronica Horwell said: ‘*The Hare* is a deliberate act of retrieval [...] a fierce resistance to the sapping of memory.’<sup>90</sup> Frances Spalding called it a ‘miracle’.<sup>91</sup> Frances Wilson wrote: ‘You have in your hands a masterpiece.’<sup>92</sup> Micheal Dirda found it easier to categorise by comparison: “‘The Hare’ belongs on the same shelf with Vladimir Nabokov’s ‘Speak, Memory,’ André Aciman’s ‘Out of Egypt’ and Sybille Bedford’s ‘A Legacy’”. ‘All four’, he continued, are wistful cantos of mutability’.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>90</sup> Veronica Howell, ‘The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance by Edmund de Waal’, *Guardian*, 2 June 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/26/hare-amber-eyes-de-waal/>> [accessed 2 April 2018].

<sup>91</sup> Frances Spalding, ‘The Hare With Amber Eyes by Edmund de Waal: The potter fired by treasured memories’, *Independent*, 18 June 2010, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-hare-with-amber-eyes-by-edmund-de-waal-2003235.html/>> [accessed 2 April 2018].

<sup>92</sup> Frances Wilson, ‘The Hare with Amber Eyes by Edmund de Waal’, *Sunday Times*, 30 May 2010, <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-hare-with-amber-eyes-by-edmund-de-waal-lmz0kb2xdt/>> [accessed 2 April 2018].

<sup>93</sup> Micheal Dirda, ‘Edmund de Waal’s “The Hare With Amber Eyes,” a family history through art’, *Washington Post*, 2 September 2010, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/01/AR2010090105971.html/>> [accessed 2 April 2018].



Virtually a lone voice, Rachel Cooke took issue with the work: ‘I could not understand, and became annoyed by, his conviction that he is not in the business of memorialising the diaspora [...] There is no shame in telling people what happened to Jewish families in the last century.’<sup>94</sup> I contend that *The Hare* is de Waal’s respectful tracing of the path of the Ephrussi clan. It speaks precisely to the issues of exile and diaspora; indeed exile compelled the writer to embark on this quest. Cooke’s criticism are of interest as they speak to the refusal of all three writers in this study to make an overt polemic of their work. Each text describes a quiet occupation of place – their modesty refuses to make of their own writing a new usurpation, even while the larger political histories that places carry are registered in their quiet attention to each location, and the figures they find to embody it.

In terms of genre, therefore, the work belongs to growing category of first-person literary non-fiction, in common with Philip Marsden, Robert Macfarlane, Alexandra Harris, Adam Foulds, Roger Deakin, and Helen MacDonald. We might consider it biography: it was awarded the Costa Biography Award in 2010. It might be considered as a biography of place, even a homage to place. Earlier we considered the text in the context of autogeography. We might reflect on what Macfarlane suggests as ‘biogeography’ in relation to Edward Thomas. The journeys within *The Old Ways*, Macfarlane says ‘take their bearings from the distant past, but also from the debris and phenomena of the present, for this is then but felt in the now’.<sup>95</sup> We observe how de Waal’s scholarly and sensory tracing of the debris of the present enables him to trace his ancestors. *The Hare* considers the place of the past, over which de Waal has particular authority. While the text follows a well-trodden path through the territory of Mitteleuropa, through its focus on place, art, and Japonisme, and exile, *The Hare* speaks to universal themes of identity and belonging, while never losing sight of the local and the singular.

De Waal’s tracing we might term both the journey into place’s past – archaeology – and the journey into the self – analysis. Adam Nicholson suggests that: ‘The

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<sup>94</sup> Rachel Cooke, ‘The Hare With Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance by Edmund de Waal’, *Guardian*, 6 June 2010, < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/06/book-review-de-waal-memoir-japanese-netsuke/> > [accessed 2 April 2018].

<sup>95</sup> Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, p. 33.

archaeologist and the psychoanalyst are close cousins'.<sup>96</sup> I suggest that Waal's particular hybrid sensory/scholarly reading might be said to offer a bespoke autogeological study of place.

Lauren Elkin's *Flâneuse* took up some of de Waal's meditation on how one inhabits place. Elkin, like de Waal considers placeness: 'There is a sense of the city you can't plot on a map [...] It is an intense embodied relationship to its atmosphere.'<sup>97</sup>

*Flâneuse* considers Self's description of psychogeographers as "a fraternity": "middle aged men in Gore-tex [...] stamping out boots [...] prostates swell[ing] as we crunch over broken glass, behind the defunct brewery on the outskirts of town."<sup>98</sup> *The Hare* and *Flâneuse* are interested in expanding the consideration of place beyond this uber-male space. De Waal is concerned with clay and dust, the very material of place, rather than the muddy hiking boots of psychogeographers and nature writers. The focus on the layered quality of place in images of threads and carpets and tapestries, the focus on centuries of documentations lend a geological quality to the work.

*The Hare* can also be compared to works going back a generation: to works such as A.J. Baker's *The Peregrine*. Baker, like de Waal, determinedly returns to a very particular domain; neither writer includes any travel details, so that the repeated forays into this terrain become one continuous journey. In voice and tone, the work shares much ground too with *The Living Mountain*. Like de Waal, Shepherd faithfully returns to the same terrain. Like de Waal, she makes no epic claims in relation to place. She does not seek to conquer the mountain, and speaks of going *into* the mountain rather than reaching its peak. However, de Waal's terrain is the cityscape, and his unapologetic treatment of material space, of art and opulence set *The Hare* apart as a particular, bespoke study of place.

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<sup>96</sup> Adam Nicholson, *Sea Room: The Story of One Man, Three Islands and Half a Million Puffins* (London: William Collins, 2013), p. 108.

<sup>97</sup> Elkin, *Flâneuse*, p. 83.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Macfarlane's essay *A Counter Desecration Phrasebook* proposes a 're-enchantment' of the land.<sup>99</sup> In feeling, touching, writing and inhabiting place de Waal illuminates the contested place of the past; he feels rather than sings life back into place. However, while de Waal shares a considered gaze and a lyrical voice with nature writers, 'place' is the urban environment. His focus is on documents: 'I like archives' he says, and 'place' for him is represented as the library, the interior of grand buildings and the artefacts that once inhabited them. It is as an academic that de Waal asks questions of place and belonging and exile. Just as Macfarlane notes Shepherd's repeated 'traverses' of the mountain, this almost devotional attention we observe too within de Waal's traverses of place from the London Library to the Bibliotheque Nationale to the original Ephrussi home in Odessa. In his introduction to *The Living Mountain* Macfarlane considers Shepherd's declaration:

I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. That is the final grace accorded from the mountain. This is Shepherd's revised version of Descartes' *cogito*. I walk therefore I am. The rhythm of the pedestrian, the iamb of the 'I am', the beat of the placed and lifted foot.<sup>100</sup>

Macfarlane's reading speaks to the physical engagement with place leading to an emotional, even spiritual engagement. One foot follows the other, forming the 'iamb'. It is however with his hands rather than his feet that de Waal feels and finds his way into the territory of the past.

The sensitive engagement with place as the site of previous occupations draws the gaze to the ground as *The Hare* traces and reclaims the place of de Waal's family. Of the three works, this text is perhaps the most conscious of the very stuff of place: dust, as he stands on the ground of his ancestors. Yi-Fu Tuan cites a native American's words when forced to cede ownership of land: 'The very dust under your feet [...] is the ashes of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the

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<sup>99</sup> Robert Macfarlane, 'A Counter Desecration Phrasebook', in *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and its Meanings*, ed. by Gareth Evans and Di Robson (London: Artevents, 2013), pp. 107-127 (p. 114).

<sup>100</sup> Robert Macfarlane, 'Introduction' in *The Living Mountain*, p. xiii. p. xxxiii.

sympathetic touch, for the soil is rich with the life of our kindred.<sup>101</sup> It is no accident that the potter is able to bring this dust to life.

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<sup>101</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 155-6.

### **3. The Trip to Echo Spring: Reading the Leaves of Place**

#### ***Place***

*The Trip to Echo Spring* is a quest narrative account of Olivia Laing's journey across America following the path of six alcoholic writers. This trip (a nod to the American tradition of the road trip) is framed by the title, from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, where the alcoholic Brick announces: 'I'm takin' a little short trip to Echo Spring,' as he refills his glass with Echo Spring bourbon.<sup>102</sup> Laing's trip is described as 'what is known in AA circles as a geographical, a footloose journey across the country, first south, through New York, New Orleans and Key West, and then north-west, via St. Paul [...] and on to the rivers and creeks of Port Angeles', her 'geographical' tracing the path of the writers.<sup>103</sup>

Place within this text seems constantly in motion, viewed from the window of trains and planes. In contrast to *The Hare*, much of the narrative takes place within the natural environment, but Laing's treatment of place also evokes the interior worlds of the writers through their journals, biographies and literary works. Place extends too to the hinterlands of alcoholism, and the journey of alcohol through the human body. When Laing interviews a consultant psychiatrist he explains the 'geography of the pleasure-reward pathways, their anatomical position within the nutshell of the human skull. He [the consultant] mapped it out for me with his hands.'<sup>104</sup> Whereas de Waal's journeying took him back through a century and a half of the Jewish diaspora, opening on to the political history of a people, Laing's places open on to both psychology and physiology.

#### ***The figure of the writer***

Laing is a British writer and former literary editor. Like de Waal, Laing is inhabiting very particular areas over which she has authority: literature and alcoholism. The

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<sup>102</sup> Laing, *The Trip to Echo Spring*, p. 12.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

alcoholism of her mother's partner has drawn her to make this journey. She says: 'What I wanted was to discover how each of these men [...] thought about their addiction'.<sup>105</sup> These writers are Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams and John Berryman, Raymond Carver and John Cheever.

The first person of *The Trip* is much more intimate, if not overtly confessional than *The Hare*: 'For years, I'd steered well clear of the period in which alcohol seeped its way into my childhood, beneath the doors and around the seams of windows, a slow, contaminating flood', she says.<sup>106</sup> This 'geographical' is an attempt to exorcise these memories. Earlier we observed de Waal's references to Proust, and Laing too is seeking to recover lost time: 'There is a school of thought that says willed amnesia is an effective way of dealing with trauma, since neurological pathways grass over, so to speak, with disuse. I didn't buy it. You aren't fully human if you can't remember your own past.'<sup>107</sup> In contrast to Proust (and to an extent to de Waal) there is nothing wistful about Laing's lost memories as she sets out to explore memory, and its absence, within place.

Laing's presence is particularly self-reflexive. While de Waal invokes Freud on the doorstep of his family's home, Laing asks herself: 'What the hell was I doing in a bar?' However, there is an ambivalence in her attitude:

Everything was looser out here, more dissipated. [...] I sensed in some small part of myself how pleasurable it might be to let alcohol unhinge you, to take you down into an unreachable, sunken place, where sounds are very muted.<sup>108</sup>

*The Trip* is no crusade against alcohol. Laing acknowledges the pleasure of alcohol, but also its power to 'unhinge', and she pushes this further, proposing alcohol's ability to access this 'unreachable' place of otherness.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

While the gaze of the potter is evident in *The Hare*, we see a different focus in *The Trip*. Laing holds a degree in herbal medicine, and as she traverses the United States her gaze falls on plant and birdlife. She is aware of beauty, but also of danger and even death within the landscape: ‘We drove on up towards the springs. The trees were glowing in the wet light. Spruce, hemlock, more firs than I could name.’<sup>109</sup> Laing is attentive the flora and fauna, but with the *hemlock* even these are menacing, perhaps even a portent for alcohol as a form of poison.

### ***Depiction of Place***

In sharp contrast to de Waal, we observe a frankness in Laing’s descriptions of place. She is delighted by New York, where she says: ‘The city was dirty and beautiful and I was entirely seduced by it’, and her descriptions are often a juxtaposition of the beautiful and the dirty.<sup>110</sup> There is an unusual democratising quality to Laing’s gaze; as the train makes its way towards St. Paul she says: ‘The light fell equally, agreeably [...] on children waiting for yellow school buses; on wooden houses, brick churches and country platforms’.<sup>111</sup> Just as there is an equality to the fall of light, so too with Laing’s hyper-realist gaze which refuses to airbrush anything out of this landscape. We see how easily she segues from beauty to decay: ‘By the time we reached Baltimore the sun was very low in the sky [...] We shuddered by a line of derelict row houses, the bricks caved in like teeth’, and the leap from brick churches to ‘bricks caved in like teeth’ foregrounds the chaos, even violence, of the lives of the writers.<sup>112</sup> Laing traces the patterns that form around her: ‘The city impressed itself on me by way of a repeating currency of images, a coinage of yellow cabs and fire escapes.’<sup>113</sup> The iconic yellow cabs ground us in reality, but Laing’s eye catches the fire escapes, recalling Williams’s work, and beyond that the constant need to escape.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid. p. 282.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

Laing's descriptions speak to the performative aspect of place. Approaching New Orleans, she says: 'By the time we reached the shore the sky was putting on a real show. [...] there was a violet cast to the shadows and the palms were printed very sharply against the rose-coloured sky', offering an image of the city as a stage.<sup>114</sup> In New Orleans, even the inhabitants figure as actors, as Laing observes 'Carroll Baker eating her lunch. Decades earlier she'd played the nubile, thumb-sucking lead in the film *Baby Doll*. Now her hair was white-blonde, not gold, and her perfect face a little swollen'.<sup>115</sup> The performative imagery also suggests place as played out, and recalls de Waal standing over a skip as his family home is stripped away.

Where de Waal plays on a variety of sensory responses to place, and uses synaesthesia to describe his response to it, in Laing the *merging* is not described as a property of her own response, but rather is projected into the landscape. She offers images of *spilling* and *pouring*, suggestive of the alcohol(ism) which pervades the text. As she approaches Key West (home to Williams and Hemingway) she says the sea 'was shallow and seamed with sandbars and deeper channels, the colours shifting musically from turquoise to green to a rich purple like spilled grape juice.'<sup>116</sup> Where de Waal treats place as providing palimpsestic layers of context for the netsuke, for Laing, place is shaped by the more amorphous focus of her question: alcoholism and its sufferers. The spilling can be considered too as staining, a term used by Adam Nicholson to describe the hold of the Scottish islands his father purchased, which are in turn passed to his own son: 'The place has entered me. It has coloured my life like a stain.'<sup>117</sup> In Laing's case, however, the stain suggests that landscape has been spoiled by alcohol. Place is *spilling* and *pouring* and *melting*, and these images too represent place as ephemeral: 'Last time I'd passed over here the earth was white all the way up to the Arctic, and the Connecticut River turned through dark bars of forest frozen the metallic blue-grey of the barrel of a gun. Now the ice had melted'.<sup>118</sup> The melted ice speaks to alcohol as well as landscape; it suggests it may be hard to get a footing. There is danger, too, in *the barrel of a gun*; and chaos as place collapses in on itself.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>117</sup> Nicholson, *Sea Room*, p. 3.

<sup>118</sup> Laing, *The Trip*, p. 7.



Whereas light for de Waal illuminated objects and places to the gaze, Laing traces the effect of light within place to reflect interior space. She says: 'I looked out through the thick glass [...] the train refuelled before we chugged out through Minneapolis, passing within half a mile of Berryman's old house'. Laing thinks of a photograph taken days before the poet's suicide: 'On New Year's Eve, he went to a party, where someone took his photo: tense, suited, the light bouncing off his glasses'. As Laing looks through the thick glass, there is an unspoken play on glass(es) as drinking receptacles. Beyond that is the question of what can or cannot be known or seen. We consider Yi-Fu Tuan's assertion "'I see" means, "I understand"' in the context of the quest to make sense of things. If we pause to consider the text as biography, Laing might be unable to fully 'know' or 'understand' the subject. The glass can be seen through, but it also reflects light back; there is perhaps an unknowability as the light is refracted from Berryman's glasses. As the refrain of the glass repeats throughout the cityscape: 'Skyscrapers, their windows glowing in the dark. [...] Buildings without windows', we might consider the glass a membrane.<sup>119</sup> This recalls de Waal's vitrine, which is both performative (a display cabinet) and protective (from dust, or at its extreme form, from ransacking). The sheet of glass in both works recalls the protection of the camera lens considered earlier in *H is for Hawk*.

Laing is attentive too to the native birdlife, such as two bald eagles: 'In flight they looked like a coat thrown into the air, ragged and enormous'.<sup>120</sup> But again, these elements of the natural world find an echo in the writer herself. The birds overhead suggest the figure of the writer, the self-reflective observer. On a Tennessee Williams walking tour, Laing watches 'swifts [...] sky-writing their unreadable letters against the wisps of cirrus', the cloud pattern traced across the sky suggesting Williams's continuing presence.<sup>121</sup> Birds also serve the function of demarcating territory:

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<sup>119</sup> Laing, *The Trip*, p.245.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

Nothing except changes in climate and language communicate so thoroughly a sense of travel as the difference in birdlife. A week later, on the way to Key West, I'd see vultures circling above Miami, ospreys in the Everglades, an ibis picking its way through a tropical graveyard.<sup>122</sup>

We observe Laing's eye, attentive to the territorial birdlife, the birds offering natural boundaries, as compared to the geopolitical borders of *The Hare*. Barriers differentiate one space from the next, as the writer (perhaps even the autogeographer, in the case of all three writers in this study) seeks to find meaning within place. Here, the vultures circle overhead, as though awaiting death, the ibis feasts on the remains. Finally, the birds hovering can be seen as a representation of the figure of the biographer sifting over (what remains of) the lives of the writers within place.

### ***Figuration of place***

As we've seen, even Laing's more naturalistic or overtly descriptive accounts of place are fraught with a personal or thematic resonance, which take them beyond purely literal designation. But she also uses a number of more overt figures to represent place. The figure of the *echo* introduced in the title recalls the gunshots of their fathers' suicides which haunted Berryman and Hemingway. At the Élysée Palace Laing discovers 'the Sunset Suite no longer existed. The boy at the front desk [...] added surprisingly: "We divided it up to get rid of bad spirits."' <sup>123</sup> Echo appears as a presence (or absence); it allows the physical to become metaphysical. Echo suggests repetition: 'I thought of poor Blanche DuBois, sneaking shots of whiskey in her sister's house in New Orleans; of Brick Pollitt, hobbling back and forth to Echo Spring'. <sup>124</sup> Laing considers Fitzgerald 'Walking madly about the house, he hears the cruel and stupid things he has said in the past repeated, magnified in the echo chamber of the night.' <sup>125</sup> Here, the *echo chamber* is Fitzgerald's conscience, but with the recurring echo we may think of Aboriginal Songlines: Laing's ear receptive to the reverberations within place.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

Laing also uses the staging post as a figure of place, and the station names draw the gaze back to the present:

Each of these locations had served as a way station or staging post in which the successive phases of alcohol addiction had been acted out. By travelling through them in sequence I thought it might be possible to build a kind of topographical map of alcoholism.<sup>126</sup>

The staging posts impose order within the narrative, but Laing also suggests the performative in *staging*, and *acting out*; Laing's *topographical map* charts the writers' uncertain path, such as Williams's 'pattern of geographical instability'.<sup>127</sup> Throughout the text (physical and fictional) place is represented in constant motion, such as Gatsby's world: 'the way it enters into you, leaving a trail of images like things seen from a moving car'.<sup>128</sup> The staging posts slow the pace, *grounding* the narrative within Laing's physical surroundings. Just as de Waal says 'We come to a full stop' in Odessa,<sup>129</sup> the station names provide temporary stops within *The Trip*: 'We reached DC at 6p.m. The tannoy sang out, "This is a smoking stop. This is a rest stop."' <sup>130</sup> The staging posts form part of the punctuation in Laing's writing of place.

Laing also uses the figure of leaves throughout the text, representing the ephemeral nature of place. She thinks of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*: 'The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly colored but torn away from the branches', place represented as unsettled, uprooted.<sup>131</sup> We see dead leaves again at Hemingway's Key West home: 'I went straight to the pool, palm-shadowed, the trees arching up above it. "You'd always be picking out leaves", an English man muttered', and leaves speak to the works of these writers, to literature itself, and its paper pages.<sup>132</sup> In the works of the writers we see the eaves of one place transported

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 337.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

to another: 'Years ago, I'd taken *All of Us*, Carver's collected poems, on holiday to Greece. There were still petals of bougainvillea and olive leaves pressed between the pages. As for the poems, they'd sunk themselves into my mind.'<sup>133</sup> And here, we observe Laing physically tracing place through its literature, as well as carrying the leaves (representing literature) from one place to the next.

Laing offers another image of leaves in the form of paper bags in Berryman's departure from Catholic boarding school, along with his brother as they 'waited for [their mother] in the principal's office, clutching their possessions in paper bags'.<sup>134</sup> The paper bags reinforce the poignancy of this displacement. This theme is taken up again in the removal of Laing's mother's partner from the family home, when the police 'take her and our air rifle into custody [...] we pack overnight bags and run away. [...] my mother finds us another house: our seventh in ten years [...] the walls as thin as paper'.<sup>135</sup> And yet we note the omnipresence of literature within this imagery, in the 'walls as thin as paper'.

We considered place as a palimpsest in *The Hare* in the images of the gold and silver thread. Laing offers an ephemeral image of place in the form of leaves, and trees identified from the train's windows, linking landscape and literature. Leaves represent the hope of literature. Reading the leaves offers a glimpse of the past as well as the future. At Carver's graveside Laing says: 'Under a bench I found the black metal box I'd heard about. I opened it and pulled out a Ziploc bag. Inside was a spiral-bound notebook [...] It was a visitors' book, each entry written in a different hand'.<sup>136</sup> This notebook speaks to the hope offered by the canon.

Finally, we consider the figure of Laing herself: 'I sat on in the sun, reading a book about Hemingway's haunts, and when at last I got up the design of my swimsuit was emblazoned into my skin, white on fiery pink.'<sup>137</sup> It is as though Laing traces offers her own skin as papyrus on which to trace place.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

### *The writer's engagement with place.*

Earlier in this chapter we considered this journey as a quest. However Laing invites us to consider it also as a pilgrimage, a word she herself uses: 'I'd made these [...] pilgrimages as a way of immersing myself in the subject of alcoholism.'<sup>138</sup> The train stations we might liken to the Stations of the Cross, where these men fell and recovered, fell again. From St. Mary's Star of the Sea Church in Key West, where Williams converted to Catholicism, she says: 'I imagined him listing up the aisle, supported by his housekeeper [...] beneath a stained glass image of Our Lady, standing in the midst of the ocean', Laing offers the image of the sea (where Williams longed to be buried), meditating on the rites and rituals of religion.<sup>139</sup>

Laing's ritual observing the rise and fall of light shows the pilgrim's progress. As she beds down for the night we see her suffering with the writers as she admits: 'a great wave of claustrophobia overtook me. I was at the tail end of a period of chronic insomnia.'<sup>140</sup> Of Carver's poetry, she says: 'I'd found out that the title of the poem referred to [...] and it was confluence he was thinking of when he wrote the line about some places standing out in his mind as if they were holy', the power of holy water reinforcing the theme of pilgrimage.<sup>141</sup>

The writers' texts carried on the journey we might liken to prayer books. (In fact, we could also compare the netsuke carried in de Waal's pocket to prayer beads. Perhaps journeys through place require talismanic objects.) *Cat on Hot Tin Roof*, she says 'was with me in my room at the Elysée now', the scene of Williams's death, as though paying homage. She remembers her encounter with the work as an A-Level text: 'It was autumn and before class started I'd sit on the radiator with my nose to the window and watch the rain sluicing crisp packets and drinks cartons towards the drains.'<sup>142</sup> The rain *sluicing* suggests cleansing on a clinical scale, and speaking to the power of literature: 'The play poured into the ugly little room, moving very

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

quickly, like something that had ruptured and could no longer be contained.’<sup>143</sup> Here, Laing depicts place as incontinent (recalling de Waal’s image of passengers being pushed up out of the ground in Vienna). Laing pushes this further: she asserts literature’s power to pour into the ‘ugly little room’, proposing literature itself as a sacramental grace.

And yet, *The Trip* is not just to be read as a pilgrimage to a predestined series of sites. Macfarlane considers the etymology of journeying in *The Old Ways*, citing the Arabic *sarha*: ‘In its original verb-form, *sarha* meant “to let the cattle [...] wander and graze freely”. It was subsequently humanized to suggest the action of a walker who went roaming without constraint or fixed plan.’<sup>144</sup> Macfarlane offers as a modern equivalent: “saunter”, from the French *sans terre*, which is a contraction of *à la sainte terre*, meaning “to the sacred place”; i.e. “a walking pilgrimage”.<sup>145</sup> As *The Trip* is both pilgrimage and a study of displacement, I propose another interpretation of *sans terre*: ‘without’ place. There is glamour, certainly in the journeys of Fitzgerald, ‘and Zelda [...] reeling hectically around the globe, ricocheting from New York to St Paul, to Great Neck, to Antibes and Juan-les-Pins’.<sup>146</sup> Williams and his partner enjoy ‘Dinner with Noel Coward, Gore Vidal or Peggy Guggenheim’, however, *The Trip* evidences how can easily one could drift from flaneur to vagrant.<sup>147</sup>

In contrast to de Waal, Laing describes the journey itself. Observing her fellow travellers, she writes: ‘The carriage was full of sleeping bodies curled up under coats and blankets [...] There was something almost eerie about it, like those Henry Moore drawings of people sheltering in the sections of the London Underground during the Blitz’.<sup>148</sup> This speaks to the democratising nature of travel and offers a glimpse of the individual within the tribe. Laing’s imagery travels seamlessly from the train carriage to Tennessee William’s church of St. Mary, from the parish to the universe.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>144</sup> Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, p. 212.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>146</sup> Laing, *The Trip*, p. 64.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

### *Temporality of place*

As with *The Hare*, here too place carries time. Earlier we considered a *geographical* instability, as places rush past, seep or merge; but we observe too a *temporal* instability as Laing allows the text to slip between tenses. See, for example, the opening of the narrative, with two characters out on a jaunt:

Two men in a car, a Ford Falcon convertible that's seen better days [...] It's not quite nine a.m. They turn off the highway and pull into the parking lot of the state liquor store. The clerk's out front, keys glinting in his hand. Seeing him, the man in the passenger seat yanks the door and lurches out, never mind the car's still moving. 'By the time I got inside the store,' the other man will write, a long time later, 'he was already at the checkout stand with half a gallon of Scotch.'<sup>149</sup>

Laing opens in the present tense. In fact, it quickly becomes clear that this is a 'historic present' tense, employed to make the narrated past vivid. But by the end of the first page we have moved through both the future – the quoting of what the man 'will write' and the past – the recorded words, themselves coming from the past, documenting the succession of events in a past tense narration. The movement within time perhaps represents the fug of alcohol. By the next paragraph, we move through time again: 'Within a few hours they'll be back at the University of Iowa, swaying eloquently in front of their respective classes.'<sup>150</sup> Earlier we considered the repeated references to *spilling*, but here we observe Laing's treatment of time as *controlled* seeping through these chaotic chronologies.

*The Trip* inhabits many timescales, including time lost to alcohol, time real and imagined, and Laing allows the complexity of alcoholic time to emerge throughout the narrative. Like the pause offered at the staging posts, Laing occasionally takes time to pause, such as the scene at the bar at Hotel Monteleone, where Williams and

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

Hemingway had drunk: ‘I ordered a lime daiquiri, and I sat on my own in the midday gloom and drank it very slowly’, and she pauses to allow alcohol to absorb within this space, to *infuse* through the text.<sup>151</sup>

Laing considers time also through the use of *repetition*: Brick wearing a trail to Echo Spring, and her writers’ returning to the same locations, such as the Chelsea Hotel, ‘never a safe place’.<sup>152</sup> This inability to progress is suggested even by the child Laing observes roller-blading in New York, yelling: “Again! Again! I’ll just do one more!” [...] as she completed each triumphant, greedy circuit’, the greedy circuits another iteration of the echo motif.<sup>153</sup>

Laing is aware of time as performative: ‘It was getting late [...] It was the cocktail hour, that lovely moment which in cinema is called magic time’, time here operating beyond reality.<sup>154</sup> Laing observes how Cheever’s ‘Stories blast forward in time, or contain false endings, false beginnings’.<sup>155</sup> She observes the skilful confusion of *The Swimmer*, where ‘Time is slopping around like gin in a glass’, and we sense Laing luxuriating in the fluidity of this confused chronology.<sup>156</sup>

Earlier, we considered Carver’s reach beyond the grave (in the form of the visitors’ book) but this study traces the reach of literature itself. It follows logically that literature is a form of communicating from *past* to *future*. Bennett and Royle assert that ‘every literary text can be thought of as involving a voice from beyond the grave, since every text is at least potentially capable of outliving the person who originally gives voice to it’.<sup>157</sup> *The Trip* is a means by which to communicate with the dead, and to commemorate these writers within a literary and historical context. Where de Waal *re-replaces* his family within a temporal context: ‘Charles enters art history’, Laing *re-replaces* the writers within the canon.

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>157</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014,), p. 76.



### *The place of the text*

In asking where this text might situate itself we consider this journey in the context of other literary explorations of place. We might suggest that Laing is following the tradition of Richard Holmes' *Footsteps*, although she is not attempting a *re-enactment* of the journey of these writers (and there is no donkey). The work has elements of group biography, but Laing refuses to separate the writers into chapters, leaving them in community with each other; it shares ground with literary biography, but Laing refuses the *distance* of the biographer.<sup>158</sup> Laing travels in community with the writers, her insomnia echoing theirs. But Laing is not simply following the path of these writers, she is seeking answers about alcoholism as suggested by the subtitle: *On Writers and Drinking*.

Laing, like de Waal, elegantly invokes those who previously inhabited place: de Waal makes his way through Paris 'at good flaneural pace,' and Laing describes herself 'a streetcar ride away' in New Orleans. Both move elegantly between the parochial to the universal: 'In Alabama the earth was red and there was wisteria in the trees. Somewhere deep in the country the train stopped in a pine forest. It was very quiet. A needle dropped lazily through the warm air'.<sup>159</sup> In such images both writers *ordain* the everyday. The constant return of the gaze to the rise and fall of light, even the 'daily'ness inherent in the 'jour'ney reinforce the quiet, meditative quality of this work.

I've traced a number of formal parallels and contrasts between Laing's text and de Waal's – but we can also observe echoes of the *themes* explored in *The Hare*. Where de Waal traces his 'family geography' stretching across Europe, Laing's trip is a 'geographical' across the United States. The image of Berryman sitting in headmaster's study with his brother, their belongings in paper bags, speaks to the image of de Waal's great grandparents leaving the Palais on the Ringstrasse, each carrying one suitcase. The natural environment however plays a much more major

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<sup>158</sup> Note *The Trip* is shelved as literary criticism at the London Review Bookshop.

<sup>159</sup> Laing, *The Trip*, p. 98

role in *The Trip* than *The Hare*, both as backdrop, and reflecting the writers' love of nature. However of the three texts in this study, *The Trip* is least concerned with place qua place. Laing shares none of de Waal's anxiety to *protect* place and its artefacts. Both writers share a quiet meditative voice; both are concerned with memory; but there are marked differences. De Waal is preoccupied with *capturing* place: 'if you want to taste this moment'; he is concerned with *re-placing* the netsuke within the vitrine, but Laing seeks to rehabilitate the *reputations* of the writers.<sup>160</sup> While Laing is content to observe patters arise within skylscapes, and disappear as quickly: 'I love gazing out of the window as the cities slide by.'<sup>161</sup> While de Waal seeks to *capture the fleeting moment*, Laing appears to rejoice in its fleeting. While de Waal mourns the disappearance of the family home at Odessa into a skip, Laing, on finding that Williams's suite has been divided up, says: 'It seemed appropriate [...] that this place where I thought I'd start my journey should turn out to be a non-place'.<sup>162</sup> And so begins *The Trip*: 'That was the path to follow, into the vanishing point, past the wavering blue brushstrokes with which the artist had indicated the threshold of his knowledge.'<sup>163</sup>

Both works consider how place can appear beyond reach. The Ephrussi house is demolished by the time de Waal arrives, and of Cheever's search for the site of his father's suicide Laing concludes 'There is no Ngasakit or Nangasakit on any map'.<sup>164</sup> Where de Waal offers the figure of the vitrine as a portal into place, Laing uses the figure of glass: windows, reading glasses, even drinking glasses, suggestive of the *Looking Glass*, offering a portal into another state of being. Cheever's introduction to alcohol, in Manhattan: 'I was offered two kinds of drinks. One was greenish. The other was brown. They were both, I believe, made in a bathtub. I was told one was a Manhattan', the Manhattan cocktail, in Manhattan, transporting the writer to place within place, place beyond place.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 29

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 61

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

In *The Old Ways* Macfarlane reflects on how paths and narratives connect: ‘In Siberia, the Khanty word usually translated as “story” also means way’, and for Laing the journey *is* the story.<sup>166</sup> Macfarlane says: ‘Our verb “to write” at one point in its history referred specifically to track-making [...] one would “write a line by drawing a sharp point over and into a surface – by harrowing a track”’.<sup>167</sup> As Laing contemplates the lives of the writers from the train window, entering ‘Cheever territory’, as she ‘follows the path of Fitzgerald’s decline’, and passes Berryman’s home in St Paul, she is forging her own path into the canon.

In view of Laing’s quiet attention to the daily rise and fall of light, we might compare *The Trip* to Katherine Swift’s *The Morville Hours*, another quiet meditation on place. Swift, a librarian and a gardener, also finds hope perennial within nature and literature. Swift ‘grafts’ her treatment of place, as she replants a monastic garden onto the framework of the ‘hours’, the daily set prayers. Earlier we considered the image of Laing sitting in the sun ‘the design of my swimsuit was emblazoned into my skin’.<sup>168</sup> Swift says: ‘Slowly the garden begins to emerge, like a photograph lifted dripping from the developing tray’.<sup>169</sup> We might reconsider the image of the chair imprinted onto Laing’s skin, as an offering of her *own body* as a photographic negative. This visceral connection between writer and place gives weight to its considerations under the hybrid genre autogeography. Earlier we discussed how the writers within this study use place as a means by which to find their bearings. We might read this as a form of grafting the self onto place as a form of proprioception within a particular space. I propose that we might re-consider the image of the chair imprinted onto Laing’s skin as a means by which the writer grafts place onto herself as much as she grafts herself onto place.

Laing’s search is for community within place. She cites what she terms Philip Levine’s ‘testament’ to Berryman: ‘I am here to tell you that in the winter and spring of 1954, living in isolation and loneliness in one of the bleakest towns of our difficult Midwest, John Berryman never failed his obligations as a teacher.’<sup>170</sup> This journey is

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<sup>166</sup> Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, p. 105.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>168</sup> Laing, *The Trip*, p. 177.

<sup>169</sup> Swift, *The Morville Hours*, p. 88.

<sup>170</sup> Laing, *The Trip*, p. 226.

Laing's bearing witness to these writers within place. Laing asserts her journey is 'an expression of my faith in literature and its power to map the more difficult regions of human experience and knowledge'. She proposes the canon as a place of hope. She reads Cheever's notes among the Berg Papers in New York Public Library: 'We have no history, we have no Dead Sea Scrolls, we have no past at all'.<sup>171</sup> Through *The Trip*, Laing proposes *literature* as a lineage of sorts. Laing's journey represents a meditative study of place, less overtly spiritual than pilgrimage per se, but observant in the quiet attention to nature. Swift speaks of:

a quiet sort of heroism, the making and keeping of books. You don't get medals for sitting in the library each day, scratching away, writing it all down [...] But it is what civilisation is made of: the collective memory, passed on, passed down.<sup>172</sup>

Swift's assertion in relation to the 'making and keeping of books', I suggest, can be said too of this text, indeed the three texts within this study, in that it speaks to the non epic, yet modestly heroic treatment of place. I suggest that Laing offers an attentive traversal of place, quietly but insistently returning the gaze to place as she traces this text into the canon.

In view of the modesty and the quiet, respectful treatment of place it is worth looking also at *The Living Mountain*, the story of Nan Shepherd's repeated traverses of the Cairngorms.<sup>173</sup> Macfarlane's *The Old Ways* reflects on how 'Shepherd's walking through the Cairngorm's celebrated the metaphysical rhythm of the pedestrian, the iamb of the "I am", the beat of the placed and lifted foot.'<sup>174</sup> I would assert that it is the paths that Laing wears within both texts and landscape that form the *iamb* of the metaphysical rhythm of *The Trip*. I would suggest that this 'I am', the 'I am' of Laing's quiet observing presence continues the tradition that Macfarlane terms the 'beat of the placed and lifted foot'.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>172</sup> Swift, *The Morville Hours*, p. 37.

<sup>173</sup> Shepherd, Nan, *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011, first published Aderdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1977)

<sup>174</sup> Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, p. 201.



#### **4. Writing on the Outrun**

##### ***Place***

*The Outrun* is the story of Amy Liptrot's return home to Orkney, a particular, remote place. Liptrot foregrounds this place by introducing it before any of the characters:

Seen from above, from an aircraft carrying oil workers out to a rig or mail bags from mainland Scotland [...] it's where the daily drama of leaving and return is played out under air-traffic control, among the low-lying isles and far-reaching skies.<sup>175</sup>

The third person remove provides both distance and an omniscient 'bird's eye' view of this scene of arrivals and departures. *The Outrun* shows place as performative: it is scene and actor, even Greek chorus within 'the daily drama'. The narrative is set in the islands of Orkney, moving occasionally, within memory, to London, which offers a counterpoint to the archipelago. This is place on the edge: separate from the 'mainland' of the UK. It is in Orkney that Liptrot traces her history of alcoholism and a process of healing and self-discovery. The family farm (the Outrun) is based on the main island, called the Mainland, and as the text progresses Liptrot ventures out further, to the more remote islands at the edge of the archipelago.

##### ***The figure of the writer***

Liptrot introduces her infant self into this space:

My mum introduces the man – my dad – to his tiny daughter and briefly places me in his lap before he is taken into the aircraft and flown away. What she says to him is covered by the sound of the engine or carried off by the wind.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Liptrot, *The Outrun*, p. xiv.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

*The Outrun* is Liptrot's search for what was lost to the wind. Liptrot is a young Orcadian writer who has undergone treatment for alcoholism and this text is a search for lost memories, what was lost to alcohol. There is great urgency to Liptrot's tracing her way home: 'When I first left Orkney, my friend Sean gave me a compass. I used to wear it round my neck at parties [...] wherever I was, north was always home. I left the compass somewhere one night. Then I was totally lost.'<sup>177</sup> *The Outrun* is the most explicitly therapeutic of the three texts. Liptrot's hyper-alert state is evident from her descriptions of casualties: 'Everywhere you turn there are dramatic views of the coastline, sweeping curves cut off by towering cliffs [...] sheep were kept there, winched on and off one by one, using ropes'.<sup>178</sup> Liptrot identifies with those casualties, however her recovery takes place within this landscape, fraught as it is with danger.

*The Outrun* is the only text in this study to consider place as 'home', but 'home' is complicated for Liptrot. Born to English parents, she is both 'native' and outsider; she says: 'At primary school, "English" was a term of abuse.'<sup>179</sup> The youngest of the three writers in this study by a decade, Liptrot's writing includes many references to social media: 'Often I feel as if my real life is inside the computer [...] I've moved around a lot but the internet is my home'.<sup>180</sup> *The Outrun* extends the consideration of place to cyberspace.

### ***Depiction of Place***

In common with *The Trip* the description of place in *The Outrun* includes the journey through places: 'I sleep a lot on the train, waking every half-hour to pins and needles and new geography.'<sup>181</sup> As she makes her way north, she notes how 'The temperature changes in inverse correlation, and for each leg of the journey – London, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Orkney – I put on another layer of clothing', foregrounding

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p.167.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

this place as a source of danger. Liptrot suggests a tension within this ‘new geography’; she seeks comfort from this wild place and yet she requires to be protected from it.<sup>182</sup>

Much of Liptrot’s treatment of place focuses on the natural world. Indeed, whereas for Laing the natural world was something like a backdrop (and for de Waal, the city was very much the focus) for Liptrot the natural world of Orkney is the main focus. But, as her descriptions suggest, this is no romanticisation. Liptrot offers unusual descriptors for wildlife within this space: ‘I hear the “classic three” Orkney birds – bubbling curlews, piping oystercatchers and lapwings, which sound like a dial up modem’, says Liptrot, the modem speaking to access to this remote place.<sup>183</sup> Indeed, Liptrot continually draws our gaze towards technology within this terrain:

I didn’t imagine I’d move to Papay and find myself in a flight path. [...] Sometimes it spooks every bird on the island [...] I watch from my kitchen window ten or so different flocks rising at once, the sky suddenly busy with clouds of greylag geese, turnstones, golden plovers, snipe.<sup>184</sup>

Airplanes form part of her landscape, and throughout the text Liptrot refuses to oppose nature and technology.

*The Outrun*, like the other texts in this study offers us a particularly sensory depiction of place and we observe Liptrot’s peculiar sensory engagement: ‘I lie forward in the wind, like a mattress of air [...] it’s loud enough to hide in.’<sup>185</sup> The animals of the *Outrun* seek shelter from the wind, but Liptrot manages to *hide* in it. The senses are fully engaged, even expanded: ‘I read about how we might have more than five senses’.<sup>186</sup> Liptrot is attune to the generosity of the senses, recalling Nan Shepherd’s assertion: ‘Each of the senses is a way in to what the mountain has to give.’<sup>187</sup> Liptrot discovers: ‘There are more dimensions than I thought: frequencies

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>187</sup> Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, p. 97.



we can't usually hear, habitats we can't normally breathe in'.<sup>188</sup> Liptrot, like Shepherd, expands into this confused space, her sensory therapy becoming a form of synaesthesia.

The senses become distorted, even inverted: 'One morning, the sky is reflected in the flat water and I'm swimming in the clouds.'<sup>189</sup> This super-sensory awareness extends from sky to sea, delighting and disorienting: 'I am exploring a very strange environment, like being in space [...] Under water, I feel like I've gone through the looking glass', as she represents the otherness of this place above and below water level.<sup>190</sup> We considered the figure of the vitrine offering a portal into place within *The Hare*, and within *The Outrun*, this portal opens into a liminal space both within and beyond reality.

Like Laing, Liptrot offers a candid portrait of place, juxtaposing beauty with decay: 'a whale corpse is decomposing in a geo [...] the skin is spread, like a carpet, over the pebbles,' and yet there is an insistent grace in this image, the skin 'spread, like a carpet', reminiscent almost of Fitzgerald's image of beach towels spread like prayer mats.<sup>191</sup>

Liptrot depicts Orkney as a dynamic place in continual dialogue with the elements. The text takes its name from a 'stretch of coastland at the top of the farm [...] pummelled by wind and sea spray', depicting a place both alive and vulnerable.<sup>192</sup> *The Outrun* is mindful of the inherent weakness of place: 'On geological maps of Orkney, a division runs through Papay [...] I search for the fault line although I am not sure what it will look like', and Liptrot's occupation is hyper-aware of danger.<sup>193</sup> Onto this terrain she maps out her own faults, such as 'the passing place near Yesnaby where the police caught me drunk-driving', among a litany of personal

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<sup>188</sup> Liptrot, *The Outrun*, p. 259.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

battle sites.<sup>194</sup> These images recall Laing's motif of staining the landscape, except that Liptrot's failures within the landscape suggests that she herself has spoiled it.

### *Figuration of place*

Liptrot's descriptions of the natural world are not, then, ever innocent of her own personal relationship to it. But – as with our other authors – she also uses several specific figures, derived from the place she is talking about, but offering larger metaphorical purchase on it. These include light and birdlife, but the most obvious figure is the edge. The edge speaks to the delineation between land and sea, north and south, illness and health. The edge is by definition a site of vulnerability. The edge defines the Outrun: 'there are no fences on the Outrun [...] In the early years of the farm, Dad climbed down and rescued ewes that got stuck on ledges, but as the flock matured, geographical knowledge and foot-sureness was bred into the bloodline'.<sup>195</sup> Throughout *The Outrun* the edge offers a powerful extended metaphor of the risk of losing one's footing, the persistent danger of failure. Yet Liptrot shows herself attracted by this edge, and this 'geographical knowledge', this ability to negotiate the edge, is central to her recovery.

*The Outrun* joins part of a growing discourse on coastal, littoral spaces, and concerned as it is with the sea is engaged too within the 'blue humanities' defined in *Coastal Works* as: 'a movement towards an historical understanding of water and its effects on human society'.<sup>196</sup> Rob Cowen's *Common Ground* proposes: 'we all still go to edges to get perspective, to be sustained and reborn,' and *The Outrun* represents a rebirth of sorts.<sup>197</sup> Adam Nicholson says: 'Islands, because of their isolation, are revelatory, places where the boundaries are wafer-thin,'<sup>198</sup> and Liptrot's work traces these wafer-thin boundaries as a weakness within place, a vulnerable point of access or exit to which we could compare the unmanned gate into the Palais on the Ringstrasse. The coast, *Coastal Works* asserts is 'the region of exchange

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>196</sup> Allen *et al*, eds. *Coastal Works*, p. 4.

<sup>197</sup> Rob Cowen, *Common Ground* (London: Windmill Books, 2015), p. 12.

<sup>198</sup> Nicholson, *Sea Room*, p. 140.

between land and sea, domestic and international space, where relationships and tensions between geography and culture are felt intensely and are played out dynamically.’<sup>199</sup> Liptrot explores this ‘region of exchange’ and *The Outrun* explores and exploits this very particular contested space, this visceral place, ‘wind-battered’, alive and evolving. The figure of the edge might be likened to de Waal’s vitrine used to delineate place, except this edge is a continuous point of entry.

Liptrot also represents the edge as a wasteland: ‘I see a car stop. The driver gets out, slings a dead sheep out of the boot then kicks it over the edge of the geo, down the cliff, into the sea below. There is a lot of edge here’.<sup>200</sup> Liptrot’s repeated images of the casualties: animals and the remains of vehicles suggests place as a burial site, place as a keeper of secrets. I suggest that in common with all three texts within this study, place is represented as an organic, living, evolving space. From archive to farmland, place is a receptacle of knowledge and memory.

Place within *The Outrun* is open to the elements, vulnerable. It is a portal between worlds. The edge is a no-man’s land, but it is more than contested space. *Coastal Works* considers it as an imaginative space: ‘As Gillis has argued, the coast has served as ‘a kind of frontier, less regulated than the interiors and providing people with a greater degree of freedom to explore new possibilities’.<sup>201</sup> I suggest that if place is a repository of imagination, secrets and myths, then the edge might be considered extreme place.

Tim Winton’s work also considers the edge: ‘A critic once called me a ‘literalist’, which delighted me. For, despite his faulty spelling, he got me right; I am a ‘littoralist’, someone who picks over things at the edges’.<sup>202</sup> Like Winton, Liptrot plays off this edge. Winton considers T. S. Eliot’s remarks on the sea: ‘We haven’t even completely mapped it, let alone explored it’.<sup>203</sup> Liptrot explores the complexity of this unknowable place:

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<sup>199</sup> Allen *et al*, eds. *Coastal Works*, p. 5.

<sup>200</sup> Liptrot, *The Outrun*, p.234.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>202</sup> Tim Winton, *Island Home, A Landscape Memoir* (London: Picador, 2015), p. 107.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

When I came to Papay, I was attracted to the idea that, by living and walking within its coast, I could become familiar with the whole island [...] however, I find out about the “coastline paradox”, which explains how it is impossible accurately to measure the length of a coastline.<sup>204</sup>

Like Eliot, and Michael Vine, writer of the Irish coastline, Liptrot is fascinated by this space which resists measurement, and yet *The Outrun* is, in a sense, Liptrot’s own tracing of herself. This place is a touchstone; it is against the ‘edge’ that Liptrot will chart her progress. She considers the physical forces of the edge with reference to her own body: ‘In grandiose moments [...] I study my personal geology [...] Forces are at work in the night [...] I grind my teeth in my sleep, like tectonic plates’, her bruxism mirroring the erosion of the coastline.<sup>205</sup>

‘I grew up here next to these cliffs [...] and this monumental material and unforgiving forces formed the limits of the island and my world,’ says Liptrot.<sup>206</sup> The edge makes up the architecture of her life, ‘I’m going north’, she says, as she continues further out to the remote islands of the archipelago, to the edge of the edge: ‘I want the islands to continue holding me together and keeping me up’.<sup>207</sup> Orkney’s edge, paradoxically, offers a sense of containment, unlike the entrapment of London, where ‘months went by when I didn’t leave Zones One and Two’.<sup>208</sup> It is this unstable place which Liptrot identifies as her ‘own place’ and within which she finds shelter. Orkney provides ways to inhabit the edge differently; to push further, almost echoing Beckett’s ‘fail better’.

In considering figures of place we look also to light. Orcadian light patterns bring a very particular sense of place. Liptrot rises before dawn to see four planets at once in this ‘early-morning sleepwalk among the planets’.<sup>209</sup> The particular pattern of light speaks to the otherness of place, offering a natural spectacle in contrast to the staged shows of Laing’s writers, or the promenading flaneurs of Paris and Vienna. Light

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<sup>204</sup> Liptrot, *The Outrun*, p. 259.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

forms a dreamscape, light creates confusion, and Liptrot builds on this depiction of otherness. Ships, even islands appear upside down, or adrift, caused by the Fata Morgana: ‘a type of “superior mirage” [...] acting like a refracting lens, inverting what we see’.<sup>210</sup> And within all three works, a distorted lens suggests place almost as mirage-like, just beyond reach.

Birds also figure throughout the narrative, providing part of the 360 degree view of place, from above and below, even past and present; they provide a silent, almost omniscient gaze, a quiet perspective. Liptrot observes, ‘The birds and seals seem bigger and tougher’, and these animals in flight, like Liptrot, co-exist with technology within this remote space.<sup>211</sup> The birds also represent mortality. Liptrot’s mother works an RSPB volunteer tracing casualties along the coastline. Liptrot takes up a job ‘searching for a rare, endangered bird: the corncrake [...] found only on the western isles and Orkney’.<sup>212</sup> Liptrot begins to see Orkney within the figure of the bird, and to identify herself within this figure: ‘I am announced with “the corncrake wife is here”’.<sup>213</sup>

Liptrot considers the figure of the corncrake: ‘In his poem “The Landrail”, John Clare describes the phenomenon of birds that can be heard but rarely seen as “like a fancy everywhere/A sort of living doubt.”<sup>214</sup> Clare’s experience mirrors her own elusive search for the corncrake, a ‘fancy’ within this uncertain space, as she gains sensitivity to the literary tradition into which she is ‘footstepping’.

### *The writer’s engagement with place*

Throughout this study we have considered to what extent each journey figures as pilgrimage, quest and spiritual retreat, but the fact that this journey takes place at home enriches the question. As Yi-Fu illustrates, a return home to recover offers a particularly fresh perspective of place:

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

A person recovering from sickness [...] is aware that he is cared for and made well as at specific locale, which may be the shade of a tree, a lean-to shelter, or a fourposter bed. [...] he is able to respond to the immediacy of the world and see it with the fresh intensity of childlike eyes.<sup>215</sup>

What Yi-Fu terms the patient's response 'to the immediacy of the world' offers Liptrot's intense engagement with place as home. *The Outrun* is a particularly Spartan iteration of home; the family home is uninhabited; her father is living in a caravan on the farm. Nevertheless, this is what Yi-Fu terms the 'specific locale' to which Liptrot returns to recover.

Home raises questions of identity and community and tribe, questions Ruth Padel considers both in the context of human and bird migration in *The Mara Crossing*: 'That word 'home' raises a whole spray of questions. What is home, for a bird? We talk about nesting instincts, but a nest is not a bird's home. [...] a nest is only temporary', she says, asking: 'Does a bird even have a home?'<sup>216</sup> These questions of home and displacement extend to the universal themes of personal and tribal identity across all three texts in this study. 'Home' is a complicated construct for Liptrot: 'I don't want to have to admit that I've come back – that I've failed. I wonder [...] if it's called coming "home" when you never belonged'.<sup>217</sup> 'Home' raises generic in the context of Liptrot's journey. Is it possible to make a pilgrimage home? To engage on a quest home? To make a spiritual retreat at home? Indeed, we might need to re-define this journey as pilgrimage/retreat/quest in reverse.

Nicholson considers something inherently religious about the placeness of islands: 'Something of the sense of holiness on islands comes, I think, from this strange, elastic geography'.<sup>218</sup> Conscious that Orkney itself is a pilgrim route, Liptrot says: 'I am following the route taken by desperate pilgrims'.<sup>219</sup> The concept of this place as a pilgrim site is reinforced when Liptrot discovers that the *Outrun* itself might be the

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<sup>215</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 138.

<sup>216</sup> Ruth Padel, *The Mara Crossing* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), p. 64.

<sup>217</sup> Liptrot, *The Outrun*, p. 85.

<sup>218</sup> Nicholson, *Sea Room*, p. 141.

<sup>219</sup> Liptrot, *The Outrun*, p. 227.

source of ambergris, a substance which Melville wrote about ‘The Turks [...] carry it to Mecca, for the same purpose that frankincense is carried to St. Peter’s in Rome’, so the Outrun might be both pilgrim site and the source of sacred offering.<sup>220</sup> We watch this pilgrim, Liptrot, progress: ‘On a windy day, I climb and kneel unsteadily on top of the trig point on North Hill. Sunlight is making a rainbow through sea spray’.<sup>221</sup> We observe a repurposing of pilgrimage: ‘I’ve been deep-sea dream-walking, tipping eyelashes out of my computer keyboard, grinding my teeth, but right now I’m relaxed. This chapel in the loch is a place of retreat, a well defended look out’, the eyelashes in the keyboard suggesting a modern pilgrim within the religious and historical context of the chapel in the loch.<sup>222</sup>

This journey figures also as a retreat. Firstly, Liptrot is retracing her steps home, but this journey is the most overtly therapeutic of the three in this study. Throughout the text Liptrot makes reference to washing up: ‘When I first came back to Orkney I felt like the strandings of jellyfish, laid out on the rocks for all to see. I was washed-up’, and this washing up could be a form of flight, retreat, return, even pilgrimage.<sup>223</sup> In her claim: ‘I’ve washed up on this island again, nine months sober, worn down and scrubbed clean, like a pebble’, the preoccupation with cleanliness echoing Laing’s text, but this is a therapeutic engagement with water. When she joins a group of sea swimmers, the Orkney Polar Bears, she says: ‘I want to shock myself awake’.<sup>224</sup> Clinical intervention is suggested in the image of her lying ‘Face down in shallow water, coated in neoprene and breathing through a tube’.<sup>225</sup> The ‘placeness’ of Orkney is central to this recovery: ‘It’s different from swimming in a heated, chlorinated, right-angled pool,’ as she viscerally engages with the elements. She finds her bearings within this liminal space, this natural edge ‘where we slip on seaweed and my fellow swimmers are half shrouded in the fog’.<sup>226</sup> Earlier we considered each writer’s engagement as proprioception. We observed de Waal unable to find purchase within the marble, his tracing of archival documents, and

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., pp. 97-98.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

Laing's markings of the literary works of her writers. In Liptrot's tracing we note the physical engagement with the elements of place itself.

No longer washed up, Liptrot begins to regain a sense of the geographical stability of the livestock on the Outrun. Watching gannets dive, she says: 'I have a sensory memory of the meteor shower a few weeks earlier'.<sup>227</sup> Just as she observes the sensory memory, she is working to realign the neural pathways (which the psychiatrist in *The Trip* described) and we observe a repetitive, physical, therapeutic element to this engagement. She says: 'I have driven all of Orkney's roads and traversed its tracks, grooved its geography into my mind', as she re-traces neural connections, realigns herself within this space.<sup>228</sup>

### *Temporality of place*

There is a particular nuanced quality to Liptrot's treatment of time within *The Outrun*. She suggests time as infinite, within this place which witnessed her arrival and departures, this place which will outlive her. Time is expansive as she observes the temporal rhythms of place: 'It feels ritualistic, this celebration of solstices and equinoxes, following compass points, moon and tide charts and sunrise calendars'.<sup>229</sup> And yet, Liptrot is conscious that time is finite: 'I think for some people it's gone too far, that all the help in the world isn't going to make them go straight'.<sup>230</sup> Her charting of the corncrake offers a temporal metaphor: extinction. This fragility extends to place itself: 'last month [...] sections of drystone dyke made of huge grey slab, which had stood through gales for 150 years, collapsed all over the farm', which takes up the theme of the ruins of de Waal's family home in the skip.<sup>231</sup>

Time is represented as a pattern, a continuum, represented in the natural forces, without beginning or end; yet we must consider *The Outrun* a tracing, a mapping of a particular moment in time. The erosion of the coastline speaks to time passing: 'I

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p. 87.



start noticing that low tides – when the rocks reaching over to the Holm are most exposed – come later twice a day, as the moon appears earlier, and I think about how they are connected.’<sup>232</sup> Liptrot begins to observe her own movement as part of this pattern: ‘I think about the earth’s rotation, and realise that it’s not that time that is going out or the moon rising ; rather, I am moving away from them’,<sup>233</sup> and this, like all the journeys in this study, is a journey in reverse, retreating and re-tracing.

Time is also represented in the play of light: ‘I’m learning new and pleasing information, such as that there are three stages of twilight: civil, nautical and astronomical’.<sup>234</sup> Liptrot traces time through light, in the images on a friend’s fixed webcam: ‘over just a few months with the same field of vision and shutter speed [...] I see the colours transform from green grass and blue skies to washed-out fields at the end of winter’, observing the slow effect of time depicted in colour. We have observed how all three works share some ground with photography as a means of examining and preserving the past. We might liken the writer to landscape or macro photographer: ‘Long-exposure photographs glow super-naturally. With all these tabs open on my browser, I feel omniscient, watching how global-transport logistics dance and intersect, never crashing, like flocks of starling.’<sup>235</sup> As the chaos of Liptrot’s life slows down, we observe a slowing of the shutter speed.

Time emerges here as technology, the storage of memory: technology as the archive. We recall the Proustian desire of de Waal and Laing to recover lost time, but there is nothing wistful about Liptrot’s memories: ‘I have been tidying up trails I left in different parts of the internet [...] while drunk [...] I used to spill my heart over the internet like red wine’, a reversal of de Waal’s desire to reinstate his family within the public record.<sup>236</sup>

In spite of the place’s fragility, Liptrot is also aware of its permanence: it was there before the inhabitants; it will outlive them. Liptrot’s observations of the tide, the fall of light, the pattern of erosion, even the repetitive bird’s migration offer an expansive

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

view. We might compare this to Shepherd's long gaze as she considers Scottish alpine flowers: 'I can imagine the antiquity of rock, but the antiquity of a living flower [...] with their angelic inflorescence and the devil in their roots, have had the cunning and the effrontery to cheat, not only a winter, but an Ice Age.'<sup>237</sup> In time, Liptrot gains an expansive quality, offering an equally Spartan ability to survive: 'I find fossils of raindrops from two billion years ago [...] I'm thinking longer term, in geological time', and we observe a hope in her gaze forward in time.<sup>238</sup> As Laing appeared to offer her skin as parchment, Liptrot uses digital imagery to record place: 'I upload my recordings to the internet – twenty-second sensory postings from my island life, like poems'.<sup>239</sup> *The Outrun* maps Orkney within an ongoing literary tradition, which began pre-Pliny and extends into virtual media. We might consider Liptrot working with – and against – a tradition of thinking of the relationship between nature and place on the one hand, and technology on the other. Cyberspace provides an observatory: 'I check the space-weather forecast – the aurora predictor', and while we observed the writer as seer within the texts, technology enhances this ability to see beyond the physical, as technology provides a contemplative sense of time, or timelessness.<sup>240</sup> As she says: 'On a night like this, Orkney poet Robert Rendall described the night sky as "tullimentan" or "glittering". In half an hour I see nineteen meteors'.<sup>241</sup> I suggest that in *The Outrun* Liptrot is grafting her own marks into this lineage.

### *The place of the text*

*The Outrun* shares a lot of ground with *The Trip*: the frank, unromantic portrayal of place and the inclusion of quotidian travel details. Water is vital to both narratives, the immersive baptisms of Liptrot's mother's church echoing the cleansing waters within *The Trip*. Importantly, though, water within *The Outrun* also signifies the elements, the 'placeness' of this territory composed of remote islands. Water too offers shock therapy: cold water swimming, and a deeper integration into place as well as community. She says: 'When I do stand up, I feel invincible in the wetsuit,

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<sup>237</sup> Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, p. 59.

<sup>238</sup> Liptrot, *The Outrun*, p. 218.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

able to walk through nettle patches and wade across lochs. Back home, I peel it off like a selkie's skin', as though accepted even by the elements.<sup>242</sup> *The Outrun* follows a fascination with wild swimming.<sup>243</sup> *The Outrun* is part of a (re)naissance of outdoor literature from Orkney: Victoria Whitworth's, *Swimming with Seals* continued the discourse on Orcadian identity.<sup>244</sup>

Will Self's review in the *Guardian* notes: '*The Outrun* comes as something of a revelation: Liptrot uses technology to enhance her engagement with the natural world', but I argue that *The Outrun* does much more than this. Liptrot's use of technology facilitates immediate transmission of and from this remote space. While this work is 'of' this period (as well as 'of' place), marked by the references to technology, in voice and emotional restraint I argue that it sits comfortably with place writing going back a generation and more. Liptrot's opening mirrors Dervla Murphy's opening in *Wheels within Wheels*, the infant self introduced into the setting of place quietly and with the distance of the third person, suggesting that place will prevail within the narrative.<sup>245</sup>

In 'placing' this text, Liptrot's tracing of place, we return to Liptrot's harnessing of technology. Liptrot's twitter account describes her as 'night listener, sea swimmer, diarist', suggesting an attention to the everyday within place.<sup>246</sup> Liptrot's work possesses a modesty, in common with the other writers in this study: a refusal to make an overt manifesto of their writing. In contrast to a contemporary writer of liminal space, Tim Winton, which whom she shares a lyrical voice, her work has no ecological agenda. Winton's polemic, *Island Home*, has been described as a 'cultural call to arms',<sup>247</sup> but Liptrot's text, I argue, sits much closer to the quieter

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>243</sup> See, for example, Roger Deakin, *Waterlog: A Swimmer's Journey through Britain* (London: Vintage, 2000) and many similar themed texts published in its wake.

<sup>244</sup> Victoria Whitworth, *Swimming with Seals* (London: Head of Zeus, 2017). Note Whitworth's claim that 'seven generations in the kirkyard' are required to establish Orcadian identity.

<sup>245</sup> Dervla Murphy, *Wheels Within Wheels* (London: Flamingo, 2002, first published London: John Murray, 1979).

<sup>246</sup> (@amy\_may, consulted 27<sup>th</sup> March 2018).

<sup>247</sup> Jamie Hanson, 'Tim Winton's *Island Home* Isn't Memoir It's a Cultural Call to Arms', *Guardian*, 13 October 2015, < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/13/tim-wintons-island-home-isnt-memoir-its-a-cultural-call-to-arms/> > [accessed 27 March 2018].

works of Shepherd and Murphy with whom Liptrot shares a markedly Spartan engagement with place.<sup>248</sup> The deep listening of *The Outrun* is evocative of Shepherd's words: 'As I stand there in the silence, I become aware that the silence is not complete. Water is speaking', and it is within a similar, quiet tradition that Liptrot works.<sup>249</sup> While Shepherd writes of the mountain and Liptrot of the archipelago. Both (Scottish) writers find something particular within nature which leads beyond time, beyond the senses, engaging with a dynamic, evolving place that is alive.

Macfarlane's essay *A Counter Desecration Phrasebook* proposes a 're-enchantment' of the land.<sup>250</sup> Liptrot takes up this challenge, using technology as conduit to re-enchant this place: 'I take a photograph of the sun setting over Westray and upload it to Facebook. My sky is converted into zeroes and ones, my personal data beamed to satellites, bounced through fibre-optic cables under the sea, through microwaves and copper wire, over islands, to you.'<sup>251</sup> Technology forms part of the liminal space, the conduit of copper wire through which she transmits the wonder of this place. Through the conversion of sky to zeros and ones Liptrot joins the Orcadian literary canon: 'I upload my recordings to the internet – twenty-second sensory postings from my island life, like poems'.<sup>252</sup> Whitworth's *Swimming with Seals* was written in the form of lyrical vignettes published as blog posts, continuing what had become a literary/technological Orcadian tradition. Forging a path into the canon, technology offers a means of tracing and mapping literature on place and place on literature. And within this charting and reporting, Liptrot says: 'I look at Northern Isles Weather, a website run by Dave Wheeler on Fair Isle. I like imagining him as a renegade meteorologist, operating independently on that far-flung isle, just north of view.'<sup>253</sup> And within this place of 'otherness', this place beyond, 'just north of view', technology offers a form of alchemy.

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<sup>248</sup> Liptrot, *The Outrun*, p. 138. Note how Liptrot, like Murphy travels light. Liptrot's frugal kit brought to work in the 'birdie hooose' recalls the Spartan kit carried on the cycle from Ireland to India;

<sup>249</sup> Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, p. 22.

<sup>250</sup> Robert Macfarlane, 'A Counter Desecration Phrasebook', in *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and its Meanings*, ed. by Evans, Gareth and Di Robson (London: Artevents, 2013), pp. 107-127 (p. 114).

<sup>251</sup> Liptrot, *The Outrun*, p. 191

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., pp. 231-232.

Earlier we considered Macfarlane's question of place: 'what does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself?' We also considered how place for all three writers is a receptacle of memory, even a burial ground. 'There are no signs that the Holm has ever been inhabited yet it is where the ancient people brought their dead', says Liptrot, and if we were to consider the three works as biography of place, I would propose that each text is closer to the grave than the cradle.<sup>254</sup> Death is important within each writer's tracing of place as it allows each writer to ask: I am of here? Could I survive here? And beyond, to the question that might be said to define identity: Would I wish to be buried here?

Liptrot's text complicates this study by asking questions of the 'placeness' of 'home' within retreat, 'home' versus exile, 'home' as the end point (rather than the beginning) of the journey. Macfarlane considers the significance of home, with reference to Shepherd's sensitivity to the local in his introduction to *The Living Mountain*:

For Kavanagh, the parish was not a perimeter but an aperture: a space through which the world could be seen [...] "All great civilisations are based on parochialism," he wrote finely:

To know fully even one field or some land is a lifetime's experience.<sup>255</sup>

I argue that in Liptrot's tracing of parish as home, she speaks to place as an expression of identity. As Liptrot's progress continues we think of Macfarlane's placing foot after foot: the iamb; we think of Liptrot's navigation of this place between land and sea, finding her footing on the slippery seaweed. *The Outrun* is Liptrot's assertion: 'I am of this place, iamb of Orkney'.

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>255</sup> Robert Macfarlane, 'Introduction' in *The Living Mountain*, p. xv.

## **5. Conclusion**

### ***What We Talk About When We Talk About Place***

These three texts make no claim to breaking the mould, or changing the landscape of creative non-fiction, nor do I propose them as such. Rather, I assert that these three texts quietly, but insistently, trace their way into the literary canon. My own readings have listened to this quietness, tracing this tracing. I've done some quiet mapping of my own, identifying both common features and local singularities in my three texts. I have pulled out particular figures, and focused on their workings, and suggested too how these resonate with other figures. I make no grand claims for my own methods either, but contend that close reading, attentive listening, and quiet noticing of tones, motifs, tricks and turns of the writing is the best form of critical response to these modest yet singular works.

Two weeks after Cooke's review of *The Hare*, a further, more positive review appeared in the *Guardian*, written by Veronica Howell and proposing that his 'book is also a new genre, unnamed and maybe unnameable'.<sup>256</sup> This study asserts that these texts are happy to occupy many and various territories as they trace new pathways into the canon. The three writers quietly assert their right to write in their own particular register, owning (re-claiming) their space. De Waal's text is unapologetic in its treatment of wealth; Laing's text is equally confident in its ambivalence towards alcohol. None of the texts however strays into the manifesto. These are quiet, personal, yet scholarly narratives.

The three works inhabit an in-between space – the liminal 'no man's land' that resides between the academic and the sensory engagement with place, the personal and quietly political treatment of place. This study suggests that the works are politically-aware but not politically-active. With restraint, the three texts further the

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<sup>256</sup> Veronica Howell, *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* by Edmund de Waal, *Guardian*, 2 June 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/26/hare-amber-eyes-de-waal/>> [accessed 2 April 2018].

discourse within this ground between place and the self, between place and art, place and history. Within these narratives of displacement each text represents a reclamation of place.

I offer no evidence these three writers have read or been influenced by each others' works, but I suggest that the works are in conversation with each other. Liptrot's drystone dyke which collapsed after 150 years, speaks to the remains of de Waal's family home lying in ruins. Each text proposes place as vanishing, eroding, 'It alarms me to realise that each of the islands is getting gradually smaller, eaten away by the sea', says Liptrot.<sup>257</sup> 'You should have seen it a month ago!' the builders say to de Waal as he stands at the source of the Ephrussi dynasty.<sup>258</sup> Each text however recognises place as fragile but resistant, as a burial place of previous inhabitants, and as witness to their lives. Each text recognises that place will outlive them.

This study therefore considers these three texts in conversation with each other, as well as with the literature of place which preceded them. I note how this discourse has continued, in the works of Whitworth, Elkin and others. 'What does this place mean?' asks Elkin, but I say that these three texts are interested not just in meaning, but in beauty.<sup>259</sup> Each text is observant in the sense of wonder within place, each text ordains the everyday.

Each text in various ways traces outlines and borders. Elkin considers this 'pushing':

Something happens when we push at boundaries, and cross over them; some ambiguity is sustained, that cannot be absorbed into some kind of homogeneous identity, in my experience those who defend this homogeneity don't much care for border-crossers, those who don't or can't respect boundaries, or, rather, respect them in a different way, by brushing back and forth against them.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Liptrot, *The Outrun*, p. 211

<sup>258</sup> de Waal, *The Hare*, p. 339.

<sup>259</sup> Elkin, *Flâneuse*, p. 3.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

Each text recognises place as a touchstone. These works both brush against and cross boundaries within place, in tune with Shepherd's assertion: 'I was not interested in the mountain for itself but for its effect upon me, as puss caresses not the man but herself against the man's trouser leg. But as I grew older and less self-sufficient, I began to discovery the mountain in itself.'<sup>261</sup> The works are informed by the physical tracing of place. The works also brush against the formal constraints of genre, and this engagement expands and enriches the canon.

Each text recognises the placeness of place, its inherent knowledge. Each text recognises, as does Macfarlane's assertion earlier that place can answer the questions that make up the writer's quest: 'what does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself?'<sup>262</sup> Nicholson says: 'Islands feed an appetite for the absolute [...] They are removed from the human world [...] a kind of silence seems to hang about them. [...] it is a virtual silence [...] that reduces the islander to a naked condition in front of the universe.'<sup>263</sup> This study proposes however that what Macfarlane terms 'any strong landscape' is bestowed with placeness: inherent wisdom. Each text recognises place a receptacle of memory. As Nicholson says of the Shanty Islands, 'this is not an empty rock; it is soaked in memory'.<sup>264</sup>

Each text traces the journey into place as well as the journey into the self. Each journey is concerned with the myriad portals and points of entry into place as well as the need to locate the exit: 'you keep your passport to hand', says de Waal.<sup>265</sup>

Each text is concerned with questions of death and survival, displacement and community, the individual and the tribe. Place in myriad ways offers the writer a glimpse at mortality.

Each text, paradoxically, recognises the lack of boundary between the self and place, as Rob Cowen asserts: 'These spaces [on the edge] reassert a vital truth: nature isn't just some remote mountain or protected park. It is all around us. It is in us. It is

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<sup>261</sup> Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, pp. 107-8.

<sup>262</sup> Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, p.27.

<sup>263</sup> Nicholson, *Sea Room*, p. 135.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115

<sup>265</sup> de Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, p. 326.



us.’<sup>266</sup> When de Waal stands surrounded by dust, he is standing on the ground of his ancestors, on the stuff of place, he is standing on his ancestors. He is standing on dust that will become clay, the stuff of his metier, but a reminder too of mortality: ‘Remember man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.’

These texts are mindful of the richness of place, as Dee recalls his own pathway:

‘W.G. Sebald was an unlikely tour guide, but showed many readers some ways back into the richness of rot, the humus of memory meeting an evanescent world.’<sup>267</sup> This study proposes that these three texts form part of the ‘humus of memory’ which will enrich the canon.

Through different paths and tracings, through reclaiming very different places, these three writers have been offered a glimpse of the self, as Shepherd discovered:

I have found what I set out to find [...] I began to discover the mountain in itself. I am not out of myself, but in myself, I am. To know Being. This is the final grace accorded from the mountain.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Cowen, *Common Ground*, p. 12.

<sup>267</sup> Dee, *Ground Work*, p. 9

<sup>268</sup> Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, p. 108.

## Part II

### THIRST: A Journey into Terroir

The famous  
Northern reticence, the tight gag of place...  
Where to be saved you only must save face  
And whatever you say, you say nothing.

Seamus Heaney, 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing'

## **Prologue**

### **The Pilgrim's Route**

Time stopped as the instructor pulled the cord and I began to freefall. Boats floated across a turquoise lake; cows came into focus, then the film in my camera ran out, so I concentrated on getting ready for landing as New Zealand raced up towards my feet.

In 1996 I filed a year's travelling expenses for attending the remote District Courts of Wicklow and Wexford and bought a plane ticket to Auckland. My Aunt Susie, a Dominican nun, collected me, semi-conscious after the journey and brought me to what felt like a safe house.

The Dominicans were forever engaged in some form of study; they always seemed to be on the way to a postgraduate course in the US or a conference in Rome. With the exception of the elderly sisters no one wore a habit. I met Dominicans who taught in schools and universities; I met a psychotherapist, a painter and a prison chaplain. It was like staying with grown up students with no children to interrupt their sentences. When the head of the order waved me off she said, if any adventure comes your way, go for it.

New Zealand offered a microcosm of the whole world. You could drive through several different weather systems in a matter of hours. The North Island was more densely populated in human terms and was home to the majority of the Maori population. There was thermal activity just hours from the Southern Alps where Edmund Hillary had trained for the ascent of Everest. This landscape accommodated everyone; bus drivers would leap up to help old dears haul on their bits and pieces, and say, good on ya.

At the north of the South Island were the sounds, dense forests packed alongside fjords, trees disguising millions of sand-flies. Farewell Spit sat at the top of the South Island, miles of deserted sand, and at the top of the North Island you could kayak

under waterfalls after paddling through mangrove forests. In the evenings, no matter how remote the pubs, you could buy good wine by the glass. When I waitressed in college the only wine we served by the glass was sprayed from a tap behind the bar like a garden hose. It was sweet and German (after the Blue Nun administration but well before the days of Riesling). Let's be honest. It was Liebfraumilch. Here you could have Chardonnay, or Syrah or Pinot Noir from the wine regions across both islands.

I emerged on deck just as the boat glided across the Sounds between the North and South Island. The trees growing up the steep hillsides of the fjords looked so close you could almost reach out and touch them. As the bus made its way south from the ferry, I saw vast vineyards of Sauvignon Blanc. There were vines growing all around me as naturally as fields of potatoes. There was often wine on our table at home and we might have passed vineyards on holiday, but I didn't ever remember noticing them.

Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc was the wine that had put New Zealand on the map. By the time the bus pulled into Marlborough I was on hallowed ground. The Cloudy Bay name was still spoken with a kind of reverence in Ireland; supply was limited to a few dozen cases in the 90s. As I posed for a photo outside the winery I might as well have been at Everest Base Camp.

Sauvignon was fresh and in fashion; the passionfruit offered a pathway into wine. This is Marlborough Sauvignon, it seemed to sing from the glass, with a rich, ripe freshness.

Terroir is the word wine writers use to describe how place expresses itself through wine. The soil and the bedrock below, the weather and the climate, all find expression in the wine. Andrew Jefford, wine writer and poet, calls it *placeness*. This wine was a confident expression of itself and it seemed to me that there was a lot to say for terroir.

When I was growing up in the north of Ireland place found expression in pavements painted red, white and blue, or green, white and gold, and in flags of various hues

that would have festooned the streets in other circumstances. Even the graffiti wasn't so much an expression of identity as a statement of exclusion: *No Pope Here. Brits Out*. I grew up with an innate awareness of the invisible geography of the Troubles. Religion was something to be tiptoed around. Seamus Heaney writes beautifully about respecting the rituals of his Protestant neighbours and how those neighbours would wait outside respectfully if they arrived when the rosary was being recited. I began to consider that wine could offer a positive expression of place.

I followed the Department of Conservation's trekking routes around the South Island. Dolphins dived under my boat on Milford Sound, their breath like steam irons as I kayaked over the black glacial water below Mitre Peak.

Every so often I retreated to the network of safe houses that ran from Auckland to Dunedin to stay a night with the sisters. One of the Dominicans who lectured in theology told me how her family had treated her to a bungee jump for a significant birthday. It was incredibly liberating, she said. You must do one darling, she said, you just launch yourself into it, like a dance. If you do it naked, she said, you get one free.

Where are you on life's journey, the sisters asked. Will you have a glass of Château Cardboard? The story of wine is the story of religion. My story is tangled up in both.

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On the road out of Queenstown, in Central Otago, I passed tourists tied onto bungee ropes preparing to leap into the gorge. Further up the road I passed young vines. The first vines had been planted in the Gibbston Valley, by an Irishman, Alan Brady, and I was taken by the sense of what might be possible.

What had first attracted me to New Zealand was the fact that you couldn't get any further away; if you kept flying, you'd be making your way back. You pass over Europe, the Indian subcontinent, Asia and Australia to find yourself retracing your steps over towns which seem to be a grid of Irish place names.

In the North Island I met Kiwi cousins and in their expressions I saw the face of a grandfather I had never met. My cousin Gerard had carried out valuations of the vineyards I was visiting. As he spread out pages of our family tree across his kitchen table, I began to trace my roots in the New World.

It had taken six weeks for my aunt Susie to arrive by sea when she set out from Ireland in the 1950s. I spent six weeks traversing both islands, six weeks reading and trekking and tasting, six weeks tracing my way into this place. Those six weeks made a profound impression.

Wine offered a way to take this place with me. I arranged for a case of Cloudy Bay to be shipped home. It could only be purchased by a New Zealand resident and I set up the order through the convent. I wrapped up another bottle in hiking gear and carried it home in my backpack.

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When I got home New Zealand inhabited my dreams and my computer passwords. I applied for a working visa, but I took up a post as a solicitor for the State at Dublin Castle. I signed the Official Secrets Act. The working visa expired. Time was mapped out by the Court Terms. I was seduced by the thrill of injunctions, the adrenaline of deadlines. Sometimes the work was politically sensitive. Everything was urgent. Occasionally my cases appeared in the *Irish Times*. I appeared before the European Court of Justice in Luxemburg. I would work into the evening, images of New Zealand taped to my office computer.

On a break between jobs I wondered if I had time to make it there and back. I moved into private practice. I acted in government inquiries; I met deadlines to avoid clients being criticised in the media. I acted in hospital inquiries. I defended vets and dentists and doctors before their professional bodies. Every minute of the day was recorded and charged as client, administration or management. It pleased me to compete against the clock, against myself.

I would notice leaves lying below my office window and realise I had missed a season. The year before my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday I decided to press pause.

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A couple of days before Christmas 2008, on sabbatical from my partnership, a customs official at Auckland airport handed me my passport and said, welcome back.

I bought Michael Cooper's *Wine Atlas of New Zealand* instead of the *London Planet*. Wine offered a way to map out the North and South Islands. Cooper's *Buyer's Guide to New Zealand Wines 2009* came along with the atlas as part of an offer. I had taken a few evening courses at home, and I had heard about the success of Pinot in New Zealand, but as I underlined the books another world was coming into view.

I spent New Year's Eve with my cousins in Hawkes Bay. I looked at maps in tasting rooms in the wineries around the Bay. My cousin Gerard, who had advised the winemakers, would look down at the map and say, didn't I value that paddock? We ate lunch at winery restaurants in the sun. We tasted everything from Chardonnay to Syrah. Stella, Gerard's wife worked for the New Zealand Apple and Pear Board; she had a quiet, confident palate, and I loved tasting with her.

In the evenings I wrote up entries in my diary which read like the beginnings of formal tasting notes. The diary often focused on food. Hawke's Bay was called the Fruit Bowl of New Zealand. The first time I was here I couldn't fathom how my cousin had such a mature garden in just ten years. Everything seemed to hop up out of the ground, like *Jack and the Beanstalk*. We would stop at roadside stalls for ice creams or fresh juices and at the farmers' markets the stallholders laid out their produce like colour charts. There were jams made of plum and walnut, rose petals and rhubarb, pineapple, and fig.

I rented a car that had cobwebs on the wing mirror and gears that struggled to make it up hills. I drove across the north of the South Island towards Nelson. I would sit in the sun outside wineries and prop up the atlas. I tasted Viognier with layers of white stone fruit. I tasted late harvest Riesling; it was rich and gold and unctuous. The



Nelson region had been populated by German settlers and the area produced rich aromatic wines. In terms of wine, with the range of geological features and weather systems New Zealand offered a microcosm of the whole world.

I stood at the monument that commemorates Tasman, the first known European to arrive in New Zealand. I stayed with Gerard and Stella's family at a holiday rental outside the Abel Tasman National Park. You could access different stages of Abel Tasman Track by water taxi and make your way back on foot. We taxied over a sparkling turquoise sea and as we walked back we passed every shade of fern and frond and fauna native to New Zealand.

At night we delved into the wine atlas to decide where to go tasting the next day. Sometimes Tom, my cousin's son, would take us so we didn't have to drive, and there was a lot of laughter over dinner in the evenings.

The owners of Rimu Grove winery were Californian, with a background in biochemistry. There were north-facing vines sloping down to a pond. It kept striking me as unusual to hear about north-facing land as a positive. When we tasted the Pinot, I found myself writing 'farmyard aroma', surprised that the wine was much more complex than the raspberry and strawberry jammy flavours I thought I loved. People kept mentioning Rimu Grove with regret as we drove around that day. There was talk of a separation and selling up. One winemaker said, whatever about staying together for the children, they should stay together for the wine.

I watched how Stella tasted. She didn't make a drama of it, but she took her time, assessing the aromas in the glass.

We passed Romney sheep on the avenue up to Himmelsfeld ('heaven's field'). Each sheep was resting under its own tree as if they had been individually allocated. The sheep had beautiful, intelligent faces, watching us as we passed. Bumble bees hovered over lavender outside while we tasted golden Chardonnays in the tasting room; they were rich and oily and buttery with a little bit of smoke.

When you carried in the wine atlas, people would talk to you. The owner had a characterful, lined face, which opened up in the conversation. Her family, of German descent, had been there since the mid 1880s. Much of the land in the Moutere region had been under orchard. She talked about how they had to uproot the apple trees the way a farmer would talk about putting down a herd. She described seeing each one going upside down, then there was no permit to burn them from November, so they lay there haunting her. They were compensated at three dollars a tree after all the losses. There was an intimacy in these conversations. People were talking about more than wine.

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We studied the atlas before I left to map out my journey south. I began to piece this place together, or what my nephew would say of his jigsaws, that bit goes there. I was conscious of the topography as I drove across the sounds towards Marlborough on the east coast. After I'd passed all the wineries, art and fruit stalls at Nelson, the scenery became alpine; it was breathtaking but frightening as I didn't trust the wheels of my car. When I had made my way up from Blenheim to Nelson, this landscape had the power to make you sad. It seemed to have a silence that almost spoke; it reminded me of the monastic settlement at Glendalough, the glacial valley in Wicklow.

I was in Blenheim, the home of Marlborough Sauvignon, before I knew it and I felt like a break from wine so I kept motoring, past vineyards with roses at the end of the rows. I kept going, past the burnt hills beyond Wither Hills winery, past Ward, past the salt fields. I saw virtually dry wide riverbeds; perhaps they only filled in winter from the snow. The sea was turquoise blue, the hills yellow, very humbling terrain. There were snow peaked caps in the distance. On the drive down through Hamner Springs I noticed that the vegetation was not native bush but pines and firs, very green: an alpine ski resort.

In Kaikoura I heard how the Maori community had been in the South Island for 700 years, and the (white) Europeans, the Pakeha, for 200. In the Memorial Park I saw sacred whale jawbones fashioned into archways.

I drove on, through Waipara, the wine region in North Canterbury. At Pegasus Bay winery I noticed netting to protect the fruit from the birds. I had to push through a crowd milling around the tasting room. A girl in strapless polka dot dress said, I'm on number four!

The owner, Ivan Donaldson, was a consultant neurologist. Having spent the last decade defending medics I was on home ground when I read his entry 'From the Prescription Pad' in the winery's newsletter. I came across a reference to a US attorney turned wine critic called Robert Parker.

The grounds were a natural amphitheatre and the aromatic whites had operatic themed names: Aria and Prima Donna. I detected lawyers from snippets of conversation at the next table. One of the lawyers was lying with his back on the grass, his feet on the chair as though he was in a yoga pose. A culture of fine dining had started since I was last here. It had its own style, which was completely without pretence. I had spotted an advertisement leafing through *Cuisine*, the national food and wine magazine, with a picture of a formal place setting that read, *We don't give a toss which fork you use.*

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I sat outside Daniel Schuster's winery, reviewing the entry in the atlas as though I was preparing to carry out an audit. Schuster had a separate entry as Winemaker of Distinction. I read that he was one of the founding fathers of New Zealand wine, and had lectured a generation of winemakers at Lincoln University in Christchurch. I read how he spent time overseas on consultancy work. In the tasting room the pourer said he was so passionate about his work that they had to drag him in from the vineyard when it got dark.

Schuster sat on a verandah overlooking his vineyard. He wore a moustache, there was something of the maverick about him; he could have strayed from the set of a western. He was a born entertainer, a show man but not a show off. I had the impression he wouldn't care whether I liked him or not. He talked about his

consultancy work in Italy where clients' choppers would circle overhead; there was a vague suggestion of the mafia.

I marked up the atlas as Schuster spoke. I hardly knew whether to just set the pen down and listen as he was speaking another language. Nothing less than forty years could be defined as *vieilles vignes* (old vines), he said. This vineyard, he said 'was twenty-five years young'. Marlborough Sauvignon he compared to Dolly Parton, whereas Old World Sauvignon he described as 'strict and sisterly'. I wrote down producers' names, trying to keep up with him. Tell them I sent you, he said.

He talked about Rolfe Mills, one of New Zealand's pioneers of Pinot in Central Otago. Schuster had taken cuttings from Rolfe's vineyard for the vines we were looking out over. Go and talk to his son Nick, he said. He talked about an Austrian winemaker, Rudi Bauer, who had invited him to taste his wines. Bauer was so passionate about his harvest, which consisted of five barrels, that their conversation lasted two days.

I'll take you to taste from the barrel, he said, but we ran out of time. That was supposed to be the first of two visits that afternoon, but before we knew it, they were closing for the evening. My head was spinning a little by the time I got to the backpackers. I hadn't learned you were supposed to spit; it seemed insulting to the winemaker, and as I watched people at the spittoons, I thought they only spat what they found unpalatable.

The hostel was a series of decommissioned train carriages. I was the only person staying that night. I brewed a pot of coffee and sat into the burgundy leather seats with the atlas in my lap. There was a chart hanging in the carriage marking the progress of the New Zealand Government Railways 1898 – 1938. A poster read *Take Thought to Lengthen Life*.

I rang my father that night. I felt like something important had happened, but I didn't know quite how to articulate it.

One of the things I most enjoyed as a partner was my responsibility for a team of ten trainee solicitors. When I qualified, supervising solicitors were called masters. Echoing the words I had heard from my own master I said to them, that door is always open. That night I was admitted into another tribe. Schuster was the first of several masters I had the good fortune to meet. It was Schuster who marked the way, offering introductions, inviting me into a world of possibility. As the sky turned from purple to orange, I read about the pioneers of Pinot as I sat in a train stationed on tracks that led nowhere.

I set out to Central Otago with an urgency I couldn't quite understand. I followed winemakers across vineyards, and as they talked about soils I felt they were talking about their own roots. Many of the plantings were relatively recent, but they were all new to me.

I started reading articles by Bob Campbell MW, Master of Wine (there were only several hundred Masters worldwide). Campbell had migrated to wine from accountancy. I began to see the world as he described it, vineyards that benefitted from cooling breezes, altitude and the aspect of a slope. Geography became a positive force.

I began to read about how oak influences the wine, how Pinot producers use French oak barrels, not American. I began to understand what it costs to age wine, what proportion of the wine is aged in new oak, how the rest would mature in old barrels. I learned the cost of a new French oak barrel in New Zealand dollars.

I began to read the weather. Harvest was approaching. I hoped the crop would be in before the rain arrived. Poor winemakers, I texted my aunt when rain was forecast. She texted back, Poor winemakers? Poor farmers!

I was stepping into the same clothes every day. A friend from college emailed, begging me to buy something decent to wear. You're spending too much money on wine, she said. I thought of George Best who said he spent 90% of his money on wine; the rest he just wasted. I kept buying as I tasted, but I was buying it to bring it home, not to drink it right away. Wine offered a means of remembering this place.

I took a lot of photographs. I wanted to record this place. I wanted to take it with me. I began to explore how place could accommodate vines. How the land and the weather could allow cultures, viticultural and human, to place roots.

Without understanding why, I found myself in tears as the ferry pulled away from the South Island. I changed my plans to hike on the North Island and flew back to Otago.

I hadn't intended to return to university. That summer on sabbatical led me to leave my practice, to take wine exams, then wine trade exams. That summer led me to enrol for an MA in Biography to explore terroir, to consider how wine offered an expression of place. This fascination began in New Zealand. When I left, I felt a homesickness for a place that had never been my home. Wine offered a way back into place.

I began to consider the generations who occupied the land before us. I read about the culture that had grown up around vines, who had written about these wines. I began to think of place itself as a receptacle of knowledge, of memory.

I wasn't sure whether I was following in the footsteps of winemakers, critics, wine tourists, poets or monks, but I knew I was not the first person to make this journey. All journeys are perhaps not so much pilgrimages as following in the steps of others, or *footstepping* in the tradition of the biographer Richard Holmes who had followed the path Robert Louis Stevenson and his donkey took through the Cévennes.

Although I couldn't quite articulate it, my research, or my search, was closer to what Janet Malcolm describes in *The Silent Woman* as the biographer breaking in under the guise of scholarship. Malcolm talks of rifling through the subject's belongings and peering through the keyhole of the bedroom door, except that with a wine atlas under your arm there was no need to break in at all. And the invitation extended by the winemaker seemed much more intimate: the first time you are invited to taste from the barrel it reminds you of asking if you can lick the spoon the first time you bake with your mother.

Although it hadn't been my intention, the buyer's guide which had come for free along with the atlas suggested a level of knowledge beyond my enthusiasm. At tasting rooms across the country, people had begun to open up as they talked about their wines.

I hadn't intended to leave Ireland or to move to London after the MA. I hadn't intended to sit the WSET (Wine and Spirit Education Trust) Diploma, the trade exams which took the better part of two years. I hadn't intended to find myself in the wine trade.

I would learn how to taste, as opposed to drink. I would learn that whether you *like* the wine has no place in the question. I would learn that you need a spittoon to taste, allowing you to think about the components and how they fit together. I would learn that even when you use the spittoon, a certain amount of alcohol is still absorbed, that you would need to take breaks. I would learn how you decide if the wine had length, how long you could taste it after it had left your mouth. I would learn how to assess the tannins (the astringent note you get from tea), the acidity, the alcohol, and how these would form the structure of the wine.

I would learn how wine could expand our sense of time. How you could taste what happened that harvest. Was there an early budburst? Did rain threaten the crop? Did early frost or hail decimate the fruit?

I would become obsessed by the innate knowledge of wine, the possibility of wine.

I would learn to assess the wine's capacity to mature. Tasting would seem to me a form of fortune telling, which is, I suppose, exactly what you are doing when you predict its capacity to age.

I would learn the geography and science of wine, but I would be drawn by the potential of wine, the possibility of place. I would come to regard wine as a form of poetry, an articulation of the poetics of place.

This obsession began in New Zealand. One of my friends in Dunedin had told me how she had travelled to the village where her father had been born in Ireland. It had made such an impression on her that she lifted a handful of soil and carried it back to New Zealand. (She would have passed sniffer dogs on arrival at Auckland Airport. The biosecurity restrictions are so strict that the first time I flew into New Zealand we were sprayed in the cabin to protect the country from disease.) I could have gone to jail for that, she said, but I had to have it.

As winemakers talked about the limestone bedrock underfoot, wine offered a way to understand this place, to understand *place*. Wine offered a way to celebrate the land underfoot. Wine offered a way to consider heritage. James Joyce wrote that the fastest route to Tara was through Holyhead. My route to Tara began in Otago.

Accustomed to what Seamus Heaney termed ‘northern reticence’, the embarrassment surrounding any sense of tribal identity, I began to consider terroir as something worth celebrating.

That summer, I set out to meet Alan Brady, Rudi Bauer and Nick Mills, the pioneers of Pinot. Almost a decade later, I would find myself among a delegation of wine writers invited to travel to Burgundy with these winemakers. I would follow the Otago tribe to the great domaines of the Côte de Nuits, the spiritual home of Pinot. These men would take me to celebrate at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, perhaps the finest expression of wine on the planet.

I would watch the winemakers of Burgundy and Otago celebrate their heritage in tribal songs. I would stand with these men in the Abbaye de St Vivant in the hills over the Côte d’Or, where the Cistercian monks had planted vines almost a thousand years ago. Through wine, through terroir, I would learn to consider place as something to sing about.

As I approached the midpoint of my own life, wine offered a rite of passage. That journey began as I sat on Danny Schuster’s balcony, looking out over his vines. It wasn’t an overtly religious pilgrimage, but it led from the Dominican convents across both islands of New Zealand to the Cistercian monasteries of Burgundy.



It was that conversation with Schuster in early 2009 that led me to set out from Canterbury holding the wine atlas in my hand like an invitation.

## Chapter 1

### Central Otago

The land feels closer, or perhaps I am closer to the land. The *Lonely Planet* says you have a sense of your own insignificance when you kayak over Milford Sound, the fjord further to the west, where Mitre Peak shoots up from the black glacial water, but I have that sense here in the Gibbston Valley, where the granite stretches up from the sides of the road. Sometimes, when I am falling asleep, I imagine myself driving along this stretch. There is something spiritual about this place.

You can't call the Gibbston Valley remote, with Queenstown airport just up the road, but this land feels desolate. There is a certain silence. The sound of the traffic absorbs into the mountains. Tour busses stop at wineries along the way, but they too seem to dissolve into the tableau; the land is so vast it can accommodate them. This place feels uninhabited, but I am not the first to come this way. In the 1880s there was a gold rush. A hundred years later the pioneers of Pinot began to put down roots.

I don't see any animals; the land is steep and stony and home only to rabbits. I am struck by some vague sense of peril; I'd rather not break down here. The ozone layer is thin over New Zealand and thinner still over Otago. Years back, my cousin Billy worked a summer on a sheep farm, the other side of Queenstown which couldn't be accessed by road, and he had the job of holding the explosives between his feet as the helicopter made its way to blast cliff paths into rock, to stop the sheep from falling into Lake Waikitipu.

After staying with my family up north, I am seeing this landscape through their eyes. My cousin's son gave up his bedroom and after gazing at his charts of New Zealand birds I see them everywhere. I can see a rabbit racing from a brown eagle. I keep coming across entries about birdlife in my diary and at night I dream of gliding through the sky as a bird. I only have that dream when I am in New Zealand.

Peregrine winery stands on the side of the valley, stark and minimalist. The metal exterior extrudes from the earth, the winery shaped in the form of a peregrine wing. I have read that birds of prey are being trained to deter birds from eating the fruit. There are predators overhead in Otago, but, just as the environment itself is untamed I'm not sure whether the eagles could be trained to do anything.

The staff ask if they can help as I hover over the Pinot in Tasting Places wine shop in Queenstown. The most important thing in winemaking is where the grapes are grown, they say. The wines from the Gibbston Valley show delicate expressions of red fruit and dried herbs, they tell me. They are more feminine, more perfumed than the intense black fruit, black cherry, and spice of the wines of the hotter desert conditions of the Cromwell Basin at Bannockburn.

You can buy a card that lets you fill either a tasting measure or a glass from the bottles, the way spirits measures are served at a bar. There are forty Otago Pinots on display, which were all shown at the Pinot Fest, a three-day celebration of Otago which just took place in Queenstown. I had thought of attending, but I didn't have anything to wear to the evening events. When I made enquiries it was over my budget. What's with all the study? my sister had asked when I emailed her. You're on sabbatical. It will probably be all about soil, it might be boring, she said. I thought it might be like a work conference, but I didn't really want to introduce myself as a lawyer. I wasn't in the wine trade, I wasn't an investor. I was unqualified, and I shied away.

I see the names Daniel Schuster mentioned: Rippon, and Felton Road and Quartz Reef (Rudi Bauer's wine). The staff say Bauer is a legend; in fact, they call him Obi-Wan Kenobi. The sales assistant says the pioneers of Pinot are still here. She says that Alan Brady lives in the Gibbston Valley. She uploads credit onto my card and over the next few days I keep coming back to taste geography.

I try the Felton Road, marked as the top wine at Pinot Fest. Mount Edward, from the Gibbston Valley I think tastes smooth, of strawberry. Quartz Reef I find spicier. Afterwards I head for Fergburger, a backpackers' haunt in central Queenstown, and order a Bambi Burger.

I sit around the hostel in the evenings. Sometimes I open a bottle. The Kindle has replaced the *Lonely Planet* and we read in a sort of companionable silence. As the others turn the pages electronically, I sift through the notes I made that day. So let me get this right, says the man I sit next to. You're here for three months and you're spending all your time in wineries. Are you going to devote your whole life to wine?

I read that Central Otago has the highest wineries in New Zealand and the furthest inland, giving it a semi continental climate, meaning it has long days and cool nights. Some areas are challenged by cold winters. The region is divided into four areas: Wanaka, Alexandra, the Gibbston Valley and Cromwell Basin. I look at the map and I see it with fresh eyes.

I head out to Arrowtown, a tree-lined village a bit out from Queenstown where tourists pan for gold. I stop at Saffron, a restaurant where black and white portraits hang on the wall. One captures a chef holding a lobster over a pot, both islands of New Zealand inked onto his forearm. *Saffron*, a hardback book of photographs, essays and recipes sits stacked up by the door. I read an essay by (Northern Ireland born) Sam Neill, New Zealand actor and winegrower, on the beginnings of Pinot in Otago. He recalls 'Rolfe Mills, with his fabulously energetic wife Lois, planted up what is arguably the world's most beautiful vineyard at Rippon, on Lake Wanaka.' Neill pays homage to 'the determined and obstinate Alan Brady at Gibbston'.

He writes 'All of us who have followed these foolhardy punters owe a great deal to them and what they learnt, largely by trial and error.' He says Rolfe Mills planted about 10 varieties in Wanaka. He says 'The surprise turned out to be Pinot Noir ... I think it was the Rippon vintages of '92 and '93 that showed us all what was possible'. These are the men that Daniel Schuster told me about. These are the vintages, the first barrels that Schuster spoke about.

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The mountains shoot straight up behind the vines as you drive along the Gibbston Valley; it looks like a ski resort after an avalanche has left only stones and dirt in its

wake. I don't have the right lens to capture this landscape; if the scene was an oil painting you would assume that the perspective was wrong.

A small yellow sign reads Historic Bridge, as though added as an afterthought to the larger brown sign directing traffic towards AJ Hackett Bungy. In the distance adrenaline junkies are preparing for their descent off the ledge, and when I look at my photographs later it looks like an execution scene. When I look again, I imagine a body is being prepared to be committed to the deep. Cold milky turquoise water stirs in silent eddies below.

I knew that I could never jump; I needed to be pushed. The last time I was here, despite everyone telling me not to leave the South Island without doing a bungy, I envisaged myself pleading with the men to untie the ropes, to let me do the walk of shame past the others waiting to launch themselves into the ravine.

When I pull in for Chard Farm winery across from the bungy, the vineyards hug the glacial valley and as the River Kowarau rushes by below I am afraid that I too might jump. When I look at the photos, I can almost hear the stony screed in the foreground giving way underfoot. The car clings to the path alongside a row of tall Tuscan looking trees that wouldn't offer much protection should the wheel veer off towards the turquoise waters below. A thinner road runs up behind the winery, traversing the purple and brown, as though the mountain is wrapped in ribbon. I wonder whose hand hovered over this map with light pencil strokes, saying, we'll put the road there.

Inside the tasting room I see photographs of vineyard workers hunched over vines in the frost, and another where they look as though they might be begging, as they shuffle along through snow, hands outstretched. There are aerial photographs and the plots have been filled in, rapeseed yellow, lime green, burgundy and grey/blue, picking up the colour of the river.

I buy a book called *How to Drink a Glass of Wine* by John Saker.

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I start making notes. I hear how the cool air rolls down the hillside. I hear that Chard Farm is a naturally frost-free site. I hear that Pinot grapes have thin skin; they are small grapes, very prone to frost. The warm days and cool nights in the valley suit them. Gibbston Valley was the first commercial vintage – prior to that this valley was sheep farming property.

I hear how growers use windmills to keep the air moving to avoid frost pockets. I learn how growers often let the grass grow between the vines – vines like competition for reserves – they like to struggle for water. I hear about glacial flowers and blue water and the mineral that forms. I hear about schist, the rock that splits, free draining rock as vines do not like their toes being too wet.

I learn about barrel maturation, how some wines spend up to 18 months in barrel. I learn about how fermentation converts sugar into alcohol and that the wine is put into French oak for 10 months, new oak, then into older barrels where there is not so much flavour, allowing the wines to soften. I learn that malolactic fermentation gives a creamery buttery note to the wine but takes from the fruit, giving less zing.

I hear there is 350 mls of rain in the Gibbston Valley, compared to 100 mls at Bannockburn (and 650 ml of rain per annum at Millford and Doubtful Sound) allowing the vine roots to go deeper. I learn that it is easier to grow organically in the desert where there are fewer pests and diseases.

I learn that some producers grow biodynamically, following Rudolf Steiner's system, working with the moon. They bury a horn from a lactating cow the vineyard, and that it energises the soil. I start to notice the pattern of the moon.

There is fruit everywhere, in wine shops and tasting rooms, Wild Country Pawpaw and Cashew Chutney, Tamarillo and Black Raspberry Chutney, Fig and Stonefruit Chutney, Onion Balsamic Marmalata. There are apricots, red and black cherries named New York and Sweetheart at a roadside stall with a sign that says *Message from the fruit: Don't squeeze me till I'm yours.*

You can hear the water rushing past if you pull over at the at the viewing point on the Kawarau River named Roaring Meg after one of the ladies who entertained the goldminers.

I set out for Cromwell in search of Rudi Bauer. Everything feels entirely foreign, but it feels like home. The Europeans who settled in this area brought with them the names of home: I wander through Wicklow Street, Antrim Street.

Rudi Bauer is based in an industrial estate on the outskirts of Cromwell. When Schuster told me about him, I imaged an elderly man. When he returns a call on my mobile he has retained his accent. Come, he says, some Austrian winemakers are over. I'll take you out to the vineyard. I am surprised to meet a man not much older than me in a t-shirt and hiking boots. Come in the jeep, he says. Three winemakers climb into the back. They ask him about biodynamics. Isn't it about marketing? They ask. To think that is to misunderstand entirely, he says.

He takes us out to the Bendigo vineyard overlooking Lake Dunstan which stands on the largest quartz reef in the country. Bauer lifts a quartz stone from the vineyard; it looks like the marble you might find on a tombstone. The wine is labelled Quartz Reef.

A chopper herds sheep off the hillside beyond his vineyard. The sheep waddle as they walk up the road in front of us, like children wearing their mothers' high heels. The air is churned up, and bits of dust and dirt stand in the way of a clear shot through the jeep window.

We taste his '04, '06 and '07 Pinots. I find a lot of question marks in my notes; I hardly know whether to trust myself. The wine is a lot more robust than I had expected. I have written *liquorice*? Bauer says the '04 shows the varietal expression best, the '07 is more charming but the '06 will age best because of its structure. So, you go back to your practice, will that be ok? He asks quietly, once the others have left.

I tell Bauer I would like to talk to Alan Brady. We're on the left once you pass the bluff, says Brady, when Bauer reaches me the phone. When I get there, they are blasting part of the bluff away. The traffic snakes around the valley floor, overhead a huge pendulum swings from a helicopter. I turn off the engine and wait.

The winery isn't signposted. I'm on a straight stretch of road and I'm lost. I keep passing Gibbston Valley, the winery which Brady founded. When I pull in to ask for directions his portrait hangs over the fireplace in the tasting room. The pourer sets up tasting glasses. He says, there'll be no charge, Alan hired me. I make my way up the hill to the Brady's house, The Drumlin, named after the hills in County Down, to the south of Belfast, where Brady was born.

Brady too is younger than I expected; he looks younger than his portrait. He is fresh-faced with a grey cropped beard. He is fit-looking; I would put him in his late sixties. He bought a section of land covered in briar and began to renovate a hut, which became a weekend retreat from his career as TV newscaster in Dunedin. The hut became a house, then the family home.

Brady, known as the Godfather of the Gibbston, was the first to plant here. Cooper's wine atlas says 'After Brady planted 350 grapevines in 1981 and 1982, "to prove they would grow", the first commercial vintage of Gibbston Valley wine was bottled in 1987.' Brady was made a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 1996. I'm not really sure why I'm here, I say, embarrassed to be taking up his afternoon now that I've got here. I'm not a journalist, I say, but I take notes as he talks nonetheless.

Brady sold his share of Gibbston Valley and set up Mount Edward winery. He gives me his co-owner's business card that reads Duncan Forsthye BIG CHEESE. He points out the path the fruit takes once it is harvested. The grapes are handled delicately on a gravity system to ensure the fruit is not damaged during production. Brady has set out bottles on an old barrel on the verandah outside his house, overlooking the Kawarau Gorge in the Gibbston Valley. After tasting the 2007 Mount Edward Pinot, we taste the more intense, single vineyard Morrison Vineyard,



2007. This is the first time the winemaker has showed me the difference a wine from a single vineyard can make: the terroir of an individual plot of land.

I tell him that I want to learn more about biodynamics. I have read that it involves making a concoction of cow manure, stirring it, and burying it in the vineyard at a time determined by the moon. That's an interesting question, he says. He is not fanatical about the subject, but he is on the board of Felton Road where they farm biodynamically and he says even the most science-driven graduates are fascinated; they want to stir the potion.

Brady opens a bottle of his own wine which he grows, harvests, vinifies and bottles himself. It is sold under his own label, The Wild Irishman, translated from the Maori word Matagouri, a weed native to Otago. No one touches the Wild Irishman, he says.

Jancis Robinson, one of the world's leading wine writers, sat here last week, tasting these wines. When the royal family come to visit, Brady welcomes them on behalf of the wine industry. He talks of the transitions from television to print journalism, and through the wine industry. He says, when you close a door behind you, close it gently. When I pull out of the drive, I feel that this was an important afternoon in my life, but again, I am not quite able to articulate why.

\*

I can't get the car radio to work and the silence stretches out before me.

Signs speak from the side of the road: *Pull over, Take a Rest* and later GO ALL BLACKS.

\*

Schuster had urged me to make contact with Nick Mills, Rolfe's son, and I head in the direction of Wanaka. I am retracing my steps. As Wanaka comes into view, I feel a dull sort of ache. I remember a man who wrote to me on the back of a map

photocopied from the *Lonely Planet* the year we met. I remember early morning mist. I remember clouds lifting and dropping over Lake Wanaka.

I seek out the backpackers' hostel where I stayed before. I talk to a Canadian midwifery student who is training in Dunedin. She loves the New Zealanders' respect for the outdoors and how they understand the weather, but she's not sure she would want to stay here. I talk to a Swiss winemaker who had plans to buy a vineyard here, but the land is beyond his budget. He has bought a small parcel of land in Southland – he says it was difficult for non-nationals to buy land here, so he wanted to get a foothold. I talk to an Englishwoman and it is refreshing to hear her sarcasm after weeks of backpackers' uptalking, where every sentence ends like a question. When the Swiss man says he had no luck with the vineyard purchase, she says, Switzerland your stock just went down. After a couple of nights her running commentary starts to get tired and I set off again in the silence of the car.

I write in my diary that the terrain feels humbling. Yesterday, the diary says, the journey was so quiet that you almost felt you should wave at any passing vehicles.

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The vines run right down to the lake at Rippon winery. I have been reading up on how bodies of water are mediating influences, bringing cooling breezes, or keeping temperatures moderate, as required. Mills says the lake at Wanaka 'acts like a big hot-water bottle'. Wedding portraits are taken here; it is known as the most photogenic winery in the world.

Cooper's wine atlas says 'Mills says he is intrigued by Pinot Noir's ability to act as 'a reflection, a medium which translates climate, soils and human activity with a direct and hopefully unmediated voice.' I leaf through my wine atlas and my buyers' guide in the tasting room. They are getting ready for a function. I taste Pinot, Gewürtztraminer, even Gamay, but the pourer is not interested in chatting. There is no sign of Nick Mills.

Wanaka is where I would have lived in my alternative life, although I know if I had stayed I would have ended up living in Auckland or Wellington, in search of high-profile litigation cases, so that in reality my life might not have been much different. As I leave, I pass the ski fields where I applied for work before I had let the visa expire. I drive past the Inn at Cadrona. It is out of the season now; the sign outside reads *If you have a shilling stop, if not, step on it*.

\*

Queenstown recedes in the rear-view mirror as I head towards Glenorchy. The lake lies out in front, set against the mountains, layers of milky turquoise and grey watercolour washed across the sky, as though someone has painted in the rain. I pull into a layby, knowing the camera will never capture the scene which changes with each turn of the road. I can smell eucalyptus. I want to get the composition right, French navy and duck egg blue as the sky meets the lake and the mountains, and in the foreground the perfect pink circles of the flowers of the rata tree. But I need to record it quickly as the moment the car door opens I can feel sandflies on my skin. Each bite acts as a cannula inviting others in, saving them the trouble of piercing the skin. It is not just an isolated sting, but an assault on the nervous system.

This landscape is sad and moody, it looks very Scottish with blues and purples and greys. I stop at the last town towards the top of the lake, the only petrol pump for miles. A lady with long white hair sits beside me in the café. She tells me that New Zealand has changed. She says that people now care about houses and money. She says it used to be if you saw someone driving a sportscar, people would say, what a wanker, but now they'd say, good on him, or, I want one in yellow.

The lady looks like an older, wilder Meryl Streep. Years later, when I watch *The Top of the Lake*, the TV series about a commune of women living in abandoned shipping containers along this stretch I wonder if I had been talking to Jane Campion. Sam Neill's essay had talked of how the landscape of Central Otago, like its wine, lingered on the palate; I keep running into characters who personify this remote, rugged place.

A yellow sign says *Caution! Back Country Road. Deep Fords. Road Conditions Vary. Vehicle Damage Possible.* I stop at a T-junction which points right to Glenorchy (8km) and left (with no distance specified) to *Paradise, No Exit.* I continue on up the unsurfaced road, a trail of dust and stones rising up in the car's wake.

The Routeburn Track, one of the Department of Conservation hikes is traced into tabletop at the backpackers' hostel. A French hiker points out his route on the ordnance survey map. You'll be gone by the time I come back, he says. He is obsessed with the weight of his walking pack; he measures everything out on the kitchen scales. He shows me a tube of toothpaste the size of the top of his thumb. His wife says he has a problem. Every time my pack reaches its ideal weight, I lower the weight, he says. She says I'm a backpack anorexic.

My pack, on the other hand, is growing. It is stuffed with books and bottles. My car serves as a large bag. There are towels and swimmers drying in the back seat. There is a stack of diaries in the boot, and a travelling towel, which hardly dries you; it feels like chamois on the skin. There are bags of potatoes lugged between hostels, tea and coffee and tins of salmon. There are books and maps and flyers, and buyers' information from the wineries and a collection of chutneys and jams has started to form, as if without any intervention from me.

The Frenchman is packing for the Routeburn Track; in fact he is planning to do two of the DOC tracks back to back. His wife stayed in Dunedin to work on a photography commission. She got a heat rash on the Heaphy track, and they were terrorized by sandflies. They took cover in the tent; they unzipped it to throw the camping permit out the door to the DOC ranger to quickly get the tent closed. They were shocked to see him wearing shorts, smacking the sandflies off his bare legs. His boss had told him to man up.

The sandflies are biting me as we speak. It seems as though the places I am attracted to are the places which bring me out in a rash. My skin is raised and angry, despite cold flannels to kill the itch which persists despite sprays and lavender and strong antihistamines. I think of our tax lecturer in Law School teaching us about urban tax

relief. He said that any area that attracted this relief was somewhere you wouldn't park your car after 6 p.m.

I take a kayak out at sunset and my underwater camera catches the hostel's Golden Retriever half submerged in the lake. My diary reads, need more memory for the camera, 100 shots alone today; a later entry reads, 200 shots.

I need to record this place. I need to take it with me.

I spend a night in a B&B after a night camping on Doubtful Sound in Fiordland, down in the south west coast. Paul, the owner, is a retired DOC warden. I tell him I saw a whale, how it had leaped up in an arch then slapped down its tail like a huge paddle. I tell him that it sounded like an avalanche even though it must have been about a mile into the sound.

I tell him that I think I might have seen a Kiwi, but I'm not sure. He pulls out sound recordings of the native birds of New Zealand. He plays various calls for me. Did it sound like call number three? What about number ten? as though asking me to choose a suspect from an identity parade. I can't decide, and his face falls. He says it must have been a possum.

He shows me fragments of gold he has panned over the years and saved in a test tube. Some time later he returns, like a child showing off his favourite toys. He has a whale's shoulder-bone in his hand and it looks like a weapon, or the base of a shovel. It looks like something you might find in an archeological dig.

He excuses himself when the phone rings; he takes the call outside as I look through the results of his expeditions. He returns perturbed. That was the girlfriend, he says checking his phone for the time. Fifty-seven minutes she spoke for, he says, as though something had been taken from him. I retire early and write up my diary. Today moody dark weather. Sandflies have worked their magic. My bites have blistered, face and neck also bitten and inflamed by the repellent. I scratch as I read over the entries.

I have started to make a list of New Zealand chefs whose books I intend to buy. I begin to record even the books I resist buying: left three books unbought today.

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I return to Cromwell. I have left it too late to book accommodation. I consider staying at a small hotel, but it looks like what my cousin would call a 'flying jug'. The crowd is rowdy, becoming rough; I am looking for some peace. I stop at the tourist office in Cromwell and they find me a last-minute deal in the Cromwell Basin.

There are rows of lavender leading down to the lake, a green lawn in front of the house and burnt scrubland beyond the lawn. There are round trees like green lollipops reflected in the opaque aquamarine lake. The water is still. The stones on the hillside look like heather. It feels like a resort after the day trippers have left and I have the place to myself.

Looking up the hill with the lake behind me there are vines on both sides of the house, like tiered seating at a stadium. There are vines in front of the house planted perpendicular to the lake. Inside, the vines are bisected by the white window blinds and I play with the lens on the camera, one shot focused on the vines, the blinds blurred, then reversing the focus so that each stands in relief against the other. When both the blinds and the vines are in focus they form little squares, as though the lens is mapping out grid references.

Later, the light has fallen over the vineyard and when I take a few shots, silver light appears like an aura in the space above the vines, as if it is a measurement of heat, and above that, a frame of charcoal cloud cover. I am always greatly taken when the light offers patterns without any intervention from the camera. When I print out the photos later the young vine shoots look like barbed wire fences captured in the falling light. They look like war photos.

Early the next morning I watch the beginning of traffic stirring on the lake. There is a red boat in the distance. In this light the vines look like foals' legs, the trellises holding them up straight before they can hold their own weight.

I see a sign that reads *Keep Central Otago Phylloxera Free* with a picture of the louse that I read has brought devastation to vineyards almost worldwide. I begin to notice signs on the vineyards that say *Certified New Zealand Sustainable Winegrowing* with an image with a green fern on one side and a purple bunch of grapes on the other. Many of the grapes are grown organically. Some are grown under the biodynamic system. I, however, require constant spraying and protection.

The sign at Felton Road winery reads *Grapevines, Microbes and People at Work. Please Respect by Driving Slowly*. The winemaker, Blair Walter is on the cover of *Decanter* wine magazine, listed as a New World Icon of Tomorrow. The tasting begins with dry Riesling (a little oily); the next Riesling is sweeter and I learn that this happens when the fermentation is stopped early so that the wine retains some natural sugar; it is therefore less alcoholic. The jewels however are the Pinots. They show complexity, power and concentration, red cherry flavours and spice, culminating in the single vineyard wines: Calvert, and Cornish Point, both vineyards are here at Bannockburn.

Further along the Cromwell basin, at Carrick winery, the table is dressed in a white cloth, but instead of place settings, a wine-glass sits at each place, each with a flower of herb from the area which finds expression in the wine. There are sun hats and sun lotions set out on tables above reinforced glass through to the rock below.

This area had been planted with cherries. Across the way further up Mount Difficulty you can see where they sluiced for gold. This is very infertile soil. I learn that the workers took rosehip berries for scurvy. You can still see the sluice marks left over from the mining, etched into Mount Difficulty in Bannockburn; they look like the wrinkles on WH Auden's face.

The wines at Mount Difficulty winery are terrific; their entry level Pinot is named Roaring Meg. A caricature of High Commissioner, John Hunt, overlooks the bar, bearing the caption:

As our High Commissioner in London I will continue the proud tradition of upholding New Zealand's image as chisel featured, raw boned rugged individuals from the bottom of the world. Is that Mount Difficulty Pinot and wild boar paté I see?

There are smears of pink across the sky; the air is hazy. Later I learn that the smoke was caused by forest fires which devastated huge areas of Australia. The smoke was carried across the Tasman Sea, giving the scene the look of a sepia portrait. Geography, in everything I have read, seems like a benign force, yet, when I look at those photos it strikes me that there is something fragile about Otago. The scene looks slightly jaundiced, and among the gold-tinged land a vineyard appears like an oasis in the burnt hills.

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By the time I reach Dunedin I have gathered quite a collection: my silent travelling companions. I take the bottles into the house. I had planned to carry them home wrapped in a hiking socks. Each bottle weighs 750gm, and with the generous Air New Zealand baggage allowance I thought I could manage them. I hadn't meant to buy so many.

I take them out of their packaging and line them in a semicircle, first in chronological order of the wineries visited: Pegasus Bay, Daniel Schuster, Pyramid Valley, Quartz Reef, Felton Road, Mount Edward. Then I drill them into colour formation, whites first, leading from rosé into red. I take photographs. What matters is where the grapes grew, they had said in Tasting Places. The bottles remind me of the dolls our father used to bring us from his trips abroad, dressed in their national costume. These wines too speak of place, gathered from the north to east then south to Otago, each bottle mapping the traverses across the South Island.



Sandra and Jan, two Dominican sisters, are hosting me. Sandra is a clinical psychologist, Jan a university lecturer. A bag of potatoes had begun to sprout in the darkness of the car boot. Sandra says they can be planted in the garden, but a few are rescued for supper; the rest will take root in Dunedin.

Sandra and I had gone on a hiking trip with my aunt at Cape Campbell on the east coast of the South Island, near Blenheim. They love board games here, I noticed that week when I saw what looked like Monopoly for farmers. Everything was about the land. We stayed in what had been farmhouses. Generally, we had the place to ourselves, but one night we shared with a group of geologists. In the evenings we would read the entries in the visitors' book. We would wonder about the people one day ahead of us as we read how they had run naked down the sand dunes. Four bottles of Veuve Clicquot – well there are thirteen of us, their entry read.

My diary said there was a full moon but when I went outside I saw only cloud. I saw purples and different peninsulas further up the coast, and beyond that the North Island.

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I am running out of days. I call ahead to a hostel further up the coast to cancel a reservation. I'm sorry, I say, I spent a few extra days down here. *Dunedin?* says the hostel owner, I wouldn't even have *gone* to Dunedin.

When we are ready to eat, Sandra announces, dinner has reached a state of perfection. A collection of native New Zealand cookery books has begun to gather among my things. I go through Sandra's recipe collection. I come across the recipe for a soufflé that suggests that you beat the arse off it. That was my aunt's, Sandra says. I am struck by the intimacy of hospitality; not just the food and the conversation, but the recipes themselves, handwritten or annotated by hand and handed down. They form a lineage, a chain of title. They speak of New Zealandness, but they are also more immediate, more candid perhaps than the diary.

Unused to company in the car, I am barraging Sandra with questions from the passenger seat as we drive north up the east coast. I hear about a group of friends who meet every month. They record their dreams and they each read one out, then the group chooses one to discuss. I have a recurring dream when I am there. I imagine that I am in flight. It seems so real, such a part of myself, that when I see birds swooping I think, I know how that feels, I can do that. I seem to be a better version of myself here. I feel more myself here than I do at home.

What I am trying to work out is what bit goes where. What bit will work where. What we need to survive. Years later when I email to ask Sandra for advice she says, it depends what you can live with, and what you need to live.

We pass Seacliffe, where Janet Frame was held as a psychiatric patient. There were no voluntary admissions in those days, and she spent years incarcerated there. She narrowly escaped a frontal lobotomy when a new doctor discovered she had just won a literary prize in the UK. When I read Frame's work, I see pathos in how the UK is referred to as 'home'. When she was awarded a writer's residence in England, her father told everyone 'Janet's going home'. Somehow this seems more poignant even than having lost both her mother and her sister in drowning accidents, than the poverty she grew up in, than the years of incarceration. A longing for a place that was never 'home' to any of her family, second class citizens of a country they would never visit.

I drive up the spine of the South Island, alongside the railway line which no longer runs a passenger service, the railway where Janet Frame's father had worked. I make my way to Teschemakers, a disused Dominican boarding school, south of Oamaru. A magnificent chapel stands in the grounds with flying buttresses and ornate stained-glass windows. The house is now a retreat centre. This place made quite an impression on me the last time I was here. There were huge quiet mature trees in the grounds; the school had just closed. One of the sisters, Mary Horn, a former leader of the Dominican order had retained a cottage on the grounds. I had seen her paintings hanging in convents across the country, in bold broad brushstrokes. She had just painted a triptych in response to her mother's death.

When Mary talks about her work, she says, I had to paint, or the doctors told me I'd get sick. A friend who saw her work for the first time had said to her, You really hung yourself on the wall, Mary, and I thought of her years later when I read the words of Martin Amis on 'how astonishingly intimate the business of fiction is, more intimate than anything that issues from the psychiatrist's couch or even the lovers' bed. You see the soul, pinned and wriggling on the wall'.

Mary tells me how she approached the Maori chiefs to seek permission to harvest clay from the riverbed to make the paste for her paints. The earth sits in a tray, lumps of buff coloured earth in various sizes. There are jam jars with ground earth in various hues, brown through yellow to red; they look like spices: cayenne and turmeric and ground coriander. She shows me the palettes. The clay is divided according to terroir: one jar is labelled Golden Bay Pumara 3, another Banks Peninsula 8 Okains.

As I follow her through her studio I am watching an alchemist at work. Much of her work is made up of gold and black, and vivid, vibrant greens. She holds up her paintings and I see white figures hovering. I am not sure if they are ghostly or celestial; I wonder if she can see beyond what is visible to the human eye.

She is preparing for an exhibition entitled Wise Women, and in the portraits of the women I observe lines and wrinkles and imagine that the tracks and rivers of Otago are etched into their faces, different expressions of this terroir.

When I talk about Quartz Reef and Felton Road, and what little I've learned so far about cultivating grapes according to lunar cycles, Mary produces a book on biodynamic farming. When we talk about Janet Frame, I come across a book of essays by Frame's biographer, Michael King. I leave a biography of Katherine Mansfield to the good, stamped Techemakers Library. We talk about Jung (about whom I know nothing) and Myers Briggs. We talk about whether we get our energy from people or solitude. We talk about what is necessary to survive.

My departure involves a neighbouring farmer and a set of jump leads. Once the engine is ignited, I keep going until I get as far as Oamaru. On my way through the

town, I pass a sign for a sculptor who carves in limestone, the favoured bedrock of the Pinot grape, another artistic interpretation of this terroir.

I stop in Oamaru because Janet Frame's family lived here. I leave the engine running outside a bookshop. I am looking for Frame's autobiography, published in three parts. It will not make cheerful reading. I'd see how you do with the first part, the bookseller says, before you buy the rest. See how you go.

What they couldn't carry, they trailed, my grandmother used to say of visitors who overstayed their welcome and left, taking everything in their wake. I haul home wine books, cookery books, chutneys and jams. Two cases of wine are in transit.

I make calls from Auckland airport until my credit runs out.

## Chapter 2

### The Rocket House

Ballycotton, County Cork. Wild garlic grows up the ditches like white bluebells. A terrace of Victorian houses faces the sea, separated from their gardens by the main street which runs through the village. Buckets and spades sit on the pavement; the headlines on the newspaper stand read NEW SEASON BRITISH QUEENS.

I arrived jetlagged, but even as the weeks pass, I find myself waking in the early hours. The harbour is so close you could almost reach out and touch it. The water is absolutely still; pale blue fishing nets lie tangled beside lobster pots on the pier. My cottage, The Rocket House, is almost suspended over the water; you could be standing on the prow of a ship, the first to see out.

The Rocket House had been the captain's house. When a boat was in trouble, he sent up a flare. A half door leads through to a tiled floor kitchen with an old-fashioned dresser crowded with jugs, butter paddles and a torch. There is a bay window with blue gingham curtains; if you sit there you are almost cantilevered over the harbour.

The Rocket House has the feel of a medieval hostel. I am following a path others have taken before me. Trainee chefs travel from all over the world to come to the cookery school at Ballymaloe, taking over the village, playing pool and tumbling out of the pubs, flying through the Main Street in their whites.

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Darina Allen, who runs the school, lifts a handful of soil. This was last year's compost, she says. You can't grow good produce without good soil. Our kitchen scraps for the next twelve weeks will become next year's compost.

Darina describes the course as ‘gastro bootcamp’. This isn’t university, she says, you come to every class. When we introduce ourselves, Darina wants to know what brought us here; she makes notes beside each name. When I stand up, I am shocked to find myself shaking. This matters to me more than I thought.

Each afternoon we sit in ‘dem’, the A-framed demonstration room, sixty-four of us, while Darina, or her brother, Rory O’Connell, demonstrates the dishes we will prepare the next day. The teachers keep reminding us not to talk; even whispers swirl up the way noise travels in a vaulted cathedral.

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Rory lifts the produce with the reverence of the host. Make a wish: the first of the new potatoes, he says.

Rory has an extraordinary palate and a huge respect for food. He holds our attention as though he is performing magic tricks. Three, two, one, done. I hope my demise is that quick, he says as he drops a lobster into salted water. We are to taste everything, to add layers of seasoning as we go along. No particular flavour, he says, should slap you across the face. As dem progresses, his tea towel is strewn over his shoulder like a pashmina. The purpose of the clove, he says, is to add flavour to the dish, *not* to anaesthetise your guests.

Rory has his own lexicon. If something pleases him he says, this is *revelation*. If a dish is progressing according to plan, he says it is *good humoured*. Lifting a soufflé, or anything that has been whipped, he looks up and says, now don’t knock it off *every available surface* in the kitchen on the way to the oven. If he is serving a vegetable he says, be generous with it, but I don’t mean *agricultural* amounts. There are no rules, he says, as long as everything is in proportion. When his afternoon demo is over a sea of students races forward, cameras trained on his dishes.

There are thirteen nations represented in the roll call. There is a cohort of gap year students who have just finished their A-levels. There is a red-haired man from the West of Ireland who surfed for the Tahitian national team. One student is World

Champion for coxless fours, on a year's break from rowing; one student works as a bouncer. There is a GP, two nurses, and an astrophysicist with an interest in fusion cuisine.

Every morning we work in pairs in the kitchen. Each student reads their recipes overnight and plans the next morning's work. That list is inspected and marked off: The Order of Work. We are marked in, issued with a dish cloth and a clean tea towel which we tuck into the band of our aprons, where you might place a sword. The tea towel is also your oven glove, so you need to keep it as dry as possible so as not to burn yourself.

Don't waste your time drying them, says Peggy as she slams pots and pans back into our work area. Peggy sold her radiators to fund the course. By the time I arrive, she has her headphones in. She's half way through an extra bread, with a few things ticked off her order of work before rollcall. This isn't the time to start asking what she got up to last night.

One o'clock races towards us, when the teachers mark our work for taste as well as presentation. Initially, we make the dishes without equipment, to get the feel of the ingredients. By the end of the first week we can make choux pastry by hand. Students with no experience whatsoever wear silver stars on their name badges. A student in our section has never weighed out ingredients; she leaves at the end of the week.

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The Rocket House stands two miles from the school in Ballycotton. The harbour lies at far end of the village, sheltered by two piers, which almost touch, like a ballet dancer's arms, giving shelter to the boats, *Cleopatra*, *Eagle II*, *Sarah Marie*, and *Molly Daniel*.

I imagine that I dissolve into the landscape, but to others, I remain the outsider. We kept your post for you, says the lady who runs the shop when I call in for milk. There had been a loud knock at the door just the night after I arrived. I opened to see a

Guard, and behind him, a friend who'd driven down from Dublin. This man here was lookin' for you, he said, stepping back to satisfy himself that he hadn't led a criminal to my door.

We went out to dinner across the road. A mist had fallen; it lifted gradually, like a curtain, revealing the lighthouse. The season hadn't really started, so we were the only ones in the restaurant, and had to keep lowering our voices. When the food arrived he said, you're looking at that through new eyes.

\*

I get up in the mornings and iron my whites. The fishermen load bait into their boats; I look for my keys and race out to my bike. The routine of the days reminds me of walking a section of the Camino de Santiago, following the pilgrim path across the north of Spain, where we got up early, climbed into the same hiking gear, and walked all day, almost merging into the mountain. The repetitive nature of the days here is a kind of meditation.

We mark up the next day's recipes as we sit in dem watching the chef. If there is something we haven't come across yet, a sample is sent around the class. We pass ingredients like jurors pausing to consider exhibits entered into evidence. We sniff, poke and prod, and if there is enough to go around, we taste.

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Darina had cheffed at Ballymaloe House with her mother in law, Myrtle Allen (always called Mrs. Allen), the woman credited with putting Ireland on the gastronomic map. Mrs. Allen's philosophy towards food chimes with what I am learning about terroir. Mrs. Allen wrote in *The Ballymaloe Cookbook*, "The butter your sister is sending us is very good", I said to my neighbour one day. 'Yes', he said, 'that field always made good butter.'"

Mrs. Allen's cookbook paid tribute to 'my generation of cooks, from Soyer to Rosemary Hume, from Escoffier to David, including those three stalwarts from Paris,



Beck, Bertholle and Child.’ Mrs. Allen wrote ‘Cooking is like a language. You hear other people speak, you taste what other people taste, you read what they have to say and then you go and do it yourself.’ This is a language I am eager to learn.

I spend hours upstairs in the library surrounded by chefs and food writers, their works often inscribed to the school. I bring home *Waugh on Wine* (long since out of print), I read AA Gill and Elizabeth David. I read the *New Yorker* food writers, MFK Fisher and AJ Liebling. I read Ruth Reichl’s accounts of dining in disguise as a food critic, and how her picture was pinned up in the kitchens of New York. During the course, we have a chance to do a night in the kitchen at Ballymaloe House. While I am there I see a note posted up to advise staff of judges or journalists staying in the house.

\*

Colm McCan, the boyish-looking sommelier at Ballymaloe House, appears in class every week, a few bottles tucked under his arm. Wine classes begin with the Old World. He produces maps, beginning with France. Colm’s course notes put a formal structure on what I have been gathering together from books and magazine articles.

Pascal Rossignol, a Burgundian wine merchant based in Ireland, addresses the class. He speaks passionately about his wines which he describes as the finest *expressions* of Burgundy. I can hardly keep up with what he is saying. He suggests reading Andrew Jefford’s *The New France*.

Colm shows us how to consider wine in terms of clarity and colour, then concentrate on the nose and the palate. Is it fresh fruit or dried fruit? Is there oak? Are there any vegetal flavours? Any mineral or floral notes? Any buttery or honey notes? The flavours should be in balance; no one characteristic should stand out over the others.

It is in Colm’s class that I first taste sherry it is a revelation. The nutty, savoury flavours are like nothing I have ever tasted before. We talk about advising guests on pairing wine with food. Every week, wine bottles are passed along the row; the spittoon follows a little faster, like the collection plate in church.

Colm introduces wine producers when they visit Ballymaloe House. We meet winemakers from Australia to South America. The winemaker from Vieux T  l  graphe talks about the terroir of the southern Rh  ne, how the large galette stones in Ch  teauneuf-du-Pape retain the heat, allowing the black grapes to ripen.

Colm recommends Jancis Robinson's wine column in Saturday's *Financial Times*. He begins to talk about building up a palate memory. Everything we taste will form part of our ability to taste, to identify and to assess wines.

Six bottles arrive addressed to me at the school, sent from Himmelsfeld in Nelson. I am asked to write a piece on their Chardonnay: my first commission. Colm is beyond generous. We open the wine in Ballymaloe House, Colm asks the chefs what they would pair with the wine. I spend the evening in the kitchen watching the chefs at work.

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The electronic windows in the school's greenhouse creak open and closed. We had planted spring onion seedlings on our first day and when they are harvested they hang from the roof, the roots like wet wool. We are free to plant whatever we want in raised beds.

In preparation for the mid-term test we learn to identify various herbs and salad greens. We stare at salad burnet, which is moss green like a William Morris pattern. We stare at sweet cicely, which we use to garnish fruit salads. It has a delicate lime green colour; it looks like a fern. We look at mizuna and mibuna, rocket and wild rocket. We run our fingers along soft sage leaves in purple flower. We look at turnip leaves, large and veined, we look at lovage, grass-green leaves that turn up to the light like cupped hands.

As the test approaches, they begin to form an amorphous mass. They all *taste* different says Eileen the gardener, her soft lilt almost a song. We look at rainbow

chard and ruby chard. *Taste, taste, taste*, says Eileen, and the other students take her at her word. By the time I enter the exam room I am confronted with a bunch of green stalks that have almost been stripped bare.

As the weather grows warmer we migrate outside to the south-facing fruit garden, where stone fruits are trailed up trellises. Soon, we are shooing away wasps. We eat lunch at tables with blue gingham tablecloths and blue china pattern, Lazy Susans in the centre, each table with a vase crowded with sweet pea flowers. Stone fruit trails up trellises and chickens wander around over the wall. We help ourselves to what we have cooked that morning, starting with green salad served in a shallow wooden bowl where every leaf tastes of itself.

We begin to learn if something is ready by touch, lifting our bread from the oven and palpating the bottom to check for a hollow sound. Gradually we learn to engage all the senses. Do you hear that? That is the sound of something about to burn, says Rory.

Students who had already cheffed arrive with their own knife bags, but most of us are issued with a new set, our initials engraved onto the blades. We learn how to handle each knife, which is for chopping, pairing, filleting, or carving. We are taught how to feel our way around the joint when removing a bone, to work around the outline rather than go at it with brute force. We learn to fillet flatfish and roundfish; we learn to look out for pin bones. We learn the outlines and contours of John Dory, mackerel, plaice and turbot, we run our knives along the spine, finding our way.

A group of us heads out on a fishing boat. We take the knife to the fish in broad brush strokes and throw the remains overboard. Hordes of birds dive towards us, screaming, as if they are coming in to land. We chop and sway in rhythm with the waves; the birds squawk, racing for the scraps. We stay out for hours, our bloody hands smeared across cameras, holding up the biggest fish we can find. Afterwards I sit on the end of the pier and watch the sun go down over the next peninsula. The GPS on my camera has logged my co-ordinates: Ballycotton, County Cork.

I first come across a monkfish in the English Market in Cork. It lies there, slack-jawed and cartoon-creepy. It looks somehow as if it is still alive, the teeth point back into its mouth like rusty nails. The top of the mouth is held aloft, awkward, like a hair lip. I find myself returning to the stall, a morbid fear urging me to look again.

We learn how to sever the head and harvest the scallop-sized piece of flesh from beneath the eyes, we struggle with the slimy tail as it slips across the chopping board. After about a month, I manage to get the Pyrex lid on over the lobsters. I watch as they change colour in the pot. I sit outside my cottage and read three different chefs explain how to kill a lobster humanely. I wonder if they believe their own propaganda. When the neighbour invites me in for a drink I snatch it out of her hand.

I am working on an *assiette de fruits de mer* in class. I am having trouble with the oysters. I have been reading Dervla Murphy, the Irish travel writer's work. I think of Murphy, who lives quietly avoiding press interviews, had said getting to know her was like trying to prise open an oyster with a wet bus ticket. A TV crew comes through the kitchen, filming for Rachel Allen, Darina's daughter-in-law. The cameraman sets down his equipment and takes the oyster out of my hand. Dig right in, he says, then continues about his work.

Producers come from across Cork: cheese makers, duck farmers and pig breeders. A game expert brings in a brace of pheasants. He plucks the birds while we watch, the feathers brown and orange, like a '70s carpet; there is a flash of red over the eyes. Soon the bird is gutted and oven-ready. He wears no apron and works so cleanly that he doesn't even roll up his shirt sleeves.

The day's recipes are divided between partners; often it is done with grace as fish and fowl are shared out between two. Sometimes it looks like dance partners filling up their cards; sometimes it reminds me of negotiation classes in law school. Wes, who has just graduated from a liberal arts college in the US, addresses me as Mrs. O'Kane as I am so much older than him. Mrs. O'Kane, would you like the meat of the sky or the meat of the sea?

\*

Most of the produce is grown on the farm at the school. When you carry vegetables into the kitchen behind dem it is like waiting backstage, as though you are between acts.

This is the best course, we keep hearing. There's so much in season, the days are long. In January the oil is still hard in the bottles when the students arrive into the kitchen. Time is represented here in the produce that sits on the countertop. In April, we had garnished dishes with wild garlic bulbs and made soups and pestos with the leaves. By May we were making ice creams and cordials from elderflower. Already the teachers are talking about what would be in season for the next course. The chilis would be strung up across the room like Christmas decorations.

The wine exam comes and goes; Colm keeps appearing with producers. Carl Ehrhard, a winemaker from Rheingau, is showing his Riesling. He tells us that we had the chance to create something new every day. A winemaker, *if he is lucky*, he says, might have thirty chances in his career, thirty chances to show what the land is capable of producing.

If your dishes have worked out in the morning, there is time to race down to the beach and get back into dem for the first roll call, your hair still wet. I have become acutely conscious of time. Darina's white dough bread recipe says that it requires four hours prep time, but not four hours of your time. While the dough rises you are free to go about your day.

Time passes quickly here but time, the seasons, seem natural rather than artificially delimited. In the office my time had been recorded by the minute. It felt productive, but sometimes it felt like being hooked to an I.V. drip, your life ebbing away. Here, time becomes more expansive but also more urgent. I am reaching the midpoint of my life.

On Wednesday afternoons a music teacher drives over from Kinsale. A few students gather in the fruit garden outside the dining room. We sit with a drum

between our knees. We aren't great, but the beat of our hands against the skin is strangely hypnotic. There is something primeval about the rhythm that draws you in; it seems to form some sort of a frame around the rest of your evening, a silent soundscape. Each week the rhythms became faster and more complicated.

The orders of work have become more complicated; there are more dishes and the dishes themselves are more complex. When Rory presents in demo there is less white space on the counter top. If I never saw another crystalized violet, he says, it wouldn't be soon enough. He has begun to talk of 're-entry', as though he is preparing to launch us back into the earth's atmosphere.

We have learned how yeast is central to the fermentation process, how some winemakers would use ambient rather than commercial yeasts. We begin to harvest ambient yeast by feeding *biga*, starters of flour and water, to make sourdough, stirring and feeding them daily. If they're neglected for too long, you have to pour them into the hens' buckets and start again.

Bread is a demanding mistress, says Peggy, producing her camera. That's them in their little sleeping bags, she says, pointing to sections of the dough loaded into the fridge to spend the night in dark plastic bags. We all have sourdough starters at various stages of fermentation or decomposition. One is labelled *The bigga the betta*, by Peggy.

We feed the chickens the scraps from the kitchen. There are bins in every colour; we are warned not to confuse them. I am afraid of contaminating them, destroying the ecosystem, and jeopardizing the farm's organic status, so I drive around for weeks with a boot full of rotting rubbish. When it starts to ferment, I get rid of the bags.

We take tea with Mrs. Allen at Ballymaloe House. Jason, who succeeded Rory O'Connell as head chef, takes us through the kitchen. Colm takes us through the cellar, the shelves crafted from ash wood from the estate. Waiheke Island Stoneridge, from the vineyard just off the coast of Auckland, sits next to the Médoc on the left bank of Bordeaux.

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The end of the village is an amphitheatre; the houses are built into the hill in terraces. Voices from the boats swirl up from the water, echoing off the cliff walls. How'd you get on? Grand.

I watch the fishermen unrolling ropes and nets from behind the safety of the glass, a viewing observatory. Men gather at the end of the pier in the evening, their fishing rods pointing out to sea. The odd word floats up, Eastern European and musical Cork lilts, but mostly they stand taciturn for hours. We observe each other separated only by a sheet of glass.

When it pours, the harbour takes on a grey light as lines of rain fall, puncturing the water, leaving tiny concentric circles, and afterwards, cobwebs hang from the chairs on the balcony, heavy with crystal beads.

Some days I get sunburned sitting out on the balcony over the kitchen. On these days the sky turns from pale to dark blue, then pink, purple, and sometimes orange: the colours of a bruise healing. Every time I look out I see something new. One night I wake and wander across to the window, half asleep; the water looks like molten chocolate, the V left behind the boat coming in like someone has run a knife slowly across the surface.

\*

I protect my space; only my sister and a friend are invited to visit. As we eat at the back door of the cottage a seagull hovers and dive-bombs their plates.

The village is alive with flashes of bright yellow galoshes; friends chat as they pass my door, so it is quiet but never absolutely silent. Dogs bark and excited children chatter as they pull on their life jackets. Rory Allen, who owns Ballymaloe House, stops as I read at the back door. We're goin' mackerel fishing,

will you come? We catch nothing; the sea is churned up after a few stormy days. He sits at the wheel, his terrier on his lap; we sit there, the three of us, staring out into the horizon. He says, I'll open the window so you can see where you're goin'.

The water is aquamarine, turquoise and green; it is so clear you can see the jellyfish. Swallows dive and swoop; gulls yell. Boys jump off the end of the pier without wetsuits, hitting the water with a crash. I watch a dolphin swim past, followed by her young.

An island lies beyond the harbour; you can reach the lighthouse on foot at low tide.

Students have brought their own traditions from across the world. A Sicilian student makes pizzas on Saturday afternoons up at the school. Philip, Darina's son-in-law, lifts the wooden paddle and says, he was born with this growing out of him. We eat pizzas with thin strips of yellow and green courgette draped over the crust; we eat nettle pizza that tastes like pepper and stings your lips.

At the cottage, fishermen leave lobsters and monkfish; they won't take anything for them.

At night the sound of the engines shutting down and drifting lulls me to sleep. Often, I wake in the night and wander across to the window. One night I watch as a boat glides in, pulling across the flat surface of the water, leaving a V in its quiet wake, like a bridal train.

The fishermen go out in all weathers. They wear wax overalls when it is rough; they don't wear sunglasses; they never learn to swim. At night I imagine it sounds like police boats chugging up the canals in Venice, or like the lake outside Michael Corleone's house, a boat dispatched to take some poor soul to sleep with the fishes.



*Austin Linbury*, the Ballycotton lifeboat sits between the boats. It splutters out purple fumes every Tuesday night. Volunteers run up and down the decks, yelling commands. Sometimes they aren't drills and I lie awake listening to the rescue chopper and dread turning on the radio in the morning.

One of the fishermen takes me out on his boat. We were taught in class how to check lobsters against a setsquare that looks like a miniature Arc de Triomphe. I watch him measure lobsters against a cigarette packet, which is the same length, checking if they need to be thrown back. I watch as he hauls up the lobster pots on ropes. Don't lift them, he says, you'll wreck your back. He knows where he has left the pots without the need for any measurement, lining up the boat against set points on the land as he has maps out the underwater geography.

Just as the galettes of the southern Rhône know to absorb the heat so the grapes will reach maturity, and the field always makes good butter, so too the fish and the fishermen know the way. I begin to consider this place as a form of terroir.

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We sit in dem, restless before the written exams. We have drawn cheffy tattoos up Peggy's arm, one of them reads *Revelation*. Rory is presenting. You'd have to love someone very much to make this for them, he says, slicing kumquats to make marmalade. Peggy says, come quickly to the compost with the kumquat compote.

When the course began, we were told not to touch the plates high up on the racks on the kitchen, they were for decoration only. As the course draws to a close the windows are covered with plastic to film Rachel Allen's new show. When the show airs, we will want to reach up and touch those plates.

\*

We race out to the tide, splashing, our feet faltering on the shells, ducking under, before the cold catches us, yelling, gasping; blinking out the salt. We take blurred

shots, hugging tight, self-portraits disappearing out of the frame; we tumble up the beach, stubbing our toes, laughing, swearing, drinking from the bottle. Two of the gap year girls throw their arms around Viki and me. You two were our favourites, they say, out of all the older people.

We dance, spinning around; the camera catches us in motion, like whirling dervishes. All sixty of us line up along the sand for a group shot, Talia jumping up in the middle, the sky purple behind us. Ballycotton sits across the bay; a full moon hangs over our heads. We race out further, chasing the tide into the dark. We shiver back up to the music and the pit spit. Someone is crying.

\*

I begin to write in the Rocket House. I write tentative pieces, attempting to capture New Zealand before it disappears from view.

Many of the students on the course will make career changes. I remember working as solicitor to a government inquiry into obstetric practices, on secondment from the practice. I remember a consultant obstetrician asking me about returning to the partnership. Things would be different when I went back, he said. It's like putting a letter back into an envelope, he said. It won't go back in the way it came out.

Soon, my mornings will start with the drive from the underground carpark at home to the underground carpark at work. From the kitchen table in the Rocket House I ring a Master of Wine to ask for advice. Do a harvest, she says.

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For months I have watched men standing staring out to sea on the end of the pier. I think of these men, like the winegrowers, living according to the seasons. Darina had told us that if you stood at the end of the pier in Ballycotton the fish would leap up onto the rod. Years later the fish, even the fishermen would somehow leap up onto the end of the pier. Years later, I would find myself invited

to Ballymaloe LitFest to read my work, the work that began here.

I fasten the bike onto the carrier on the boot. I take off, past the fuchsia in bloom on the drystone walls, past fields of potatoes in bloom. I pass the turn for the school. Soon the next students will struggle with the buttons on new chef's whites. They will step into their clogs, lift the tea towels laid out in their sections and tuck them into their aprons.

## Chapter 3

### Vendange

It is late September 2009. I am on a train heading north out of Bordeaux city. I am hurtling towards the hallowed land of the Médoc. I am reading frantically, hardly taking in my surroundings. Andrew Jefford's *The New France* says Bordeaux's success 'also furnishes the scale by which all other French regions measure themselves. Indeed every producer who has ambitions to make great red wine anywhere in the world looks to Bordeaux.' Reinforcing the point, he says, 'It is to French wine what Shakespeare is to English drama, what Verdi is to Italian opera, or what Tolstoy is to the Russian novel: inexhaustible, containing multitudes, defining not merely itself but the whole culture in which it exists.'

Harvest has begun. I had been barraging winemakers but most had a dedicated team of pickers who returned year after year. One winemaker in Austria looked promising, but he wasn't harvesting until October; the Courts would be sitting by then, my sabbatical would be over.

I wanted to work the season somewhere where they harvested by hand rather than machine. I had considered Burgundy, the wine of the romantic, but I found myself in Bordeaux, the homeland of the wine of the intellectual. I met a wine merchant who said he could help. He copied me in on email which said I had sat the WSET exams (which would be true within a couple years), and that I spoke fluent French (which had been true twenty years ago). He forwarded an email from Château Meyney in St-Estèphe saying the château could accommodate me.

I read Colm's Ballymaloe notes as though I am about to sit an exam paper. The Médoc lies on the left bank of the River Gironde. The wines of the right bank are primarily Merlot, grown on clay, whereas the left bank wines are a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, grown in stony soil that drains well. I return to *The New France*. 'There are few places in France,' Jefford continues, 'where the complex trusts of terroir are explored with subtler articulacy than here. In principle, all of the

best sites are similar: well-drained gravel banks set back from the marshy lowland at the water's edge'.

I read on, my nervousness increasing when I find a separate entry for Château Meyney, 'The 49 hectares of Meyney sit just north of Montrose in St-Estèphe, looking out across the Gironde with a superb view of the Blayais nuclear power station; the terroir is unusual in that the vines' roots grasp ample blue clay as well as gravels. This Cordier-owned property generally produces a full-flavoured, sturdy, smoky wine offering fine value and impressive consistency.'

Next station, Pauillac, says the driver. I cram my notes into the backpack. It's a bit late for the books now.

The email said that the vineyard manager would meet me at the station, and a man wearing jeans grabs my hand with a hearty shake. He throws my backpack into the back of a white van and asks if I'd mind taking the dog on my knee. I have the fluency of a child; I have little to offer in the way of conversation. I decide that if I nod at the end of his sentences he might assume some sort of intelligence on my part. It goes without saying that any attempt at humour is to be avoided.

The names of châteaux I have only read about flash past the window. As we drive on, flat open land opens out onto the banks of the Gironde and I see fishing nets cantilevered over the water protruding from fishing huts on the banks.

We drive on through a canopy of plane trees. We can see the château from the road: a low building with white shutters on ivy clad walls overlooking vines that run perpendicular to the water. The château had been established in 1662 by monks, the manager says. It was bought over by Credit Agricole Grand Crus, in Paris.

I nod, taking it all in. I have just started to relax into the conversation when the manager mentions that the bankers are coming for dinner. It sounds as though Rochford, the absentee landlord is returning to the estate at short notice. A sort of panic grips me. Stephen Brook, an authority on Bordeaux had written, 'Lunch at a Bordeaux château can be a seductive experience, with silent servants, often clad in

aprons imprinted with the château name, gliding in and out with trays of Champagne and food. Silver service is *de rigueur*.' Not only is my French a series of stammers, but I have nothing to wear. I have packed one lipstick, one pair of jeans, a few t-shirts, a pair of sandals, and a pashmina. I am underdressed and underqualified.

We stop behind the main building where I met the *maître de chai*, the cellar master. I think I see his eyebrows rising which I recognise as the code for, who are you saddling us with at busiest time of the year? I have used the same expression when asked to take in a work experience student. He, however, is charming and welcoming. Yes, he will try to get me into the cellar. In the meantime, I am to start in the vines.

The vineyard manager pulls up outside a concrete building off a yard behind the château. These are the *vendangeurs*' dormitories, he says. Do I have everything I need, he asks, stopping on his way out, to check if I've eaten. It's not until the door closes that I realise the conversation about the bankers' dinner has been lost in translation. I am not invited; I will not need to dress for dinner. I lie down on one of the beds and laugh into the pillow.

The dorm has two rows of cot beds with iron frames, each made up with a white cotton sheet, a fitted sheet and pillow, and a spotlessly clean but thin orange striped woollen blanket. The room is not overly warm. I should have packed my sleeping bag. I choose a bed away from the door and pull out a packet of crackers I brought from the flight.

I decide to have a look around the estate. I climb over the sign outside the cellar that reads *Inderdit au Public*. I take a walk around the château, and when I return to the dorms someone has pinned a list onto the door that reads *Vendanges* (harvest) 2009. The list is headed *Dortoir Filles*; eight French names are printed in alphabetical order. Another has been added at the bottom of the list in blue pen, copied from my passport. A similar sized list has been pinned up on the mens' dorm next door.

I had imagined I might be staying a little room inside the château. For some reason I had envisaged checked curtains that looked out onto the vines. I had a vague picture

of working alongside a few English-speaking winemakers from the New World on overseas experience while their own vines were in winter. I had imagined a group of us perched on bar stools after work as I absorbed their expertise by osmosis.

Shortly afterwards, a camper van pulls up outside; two car loads follow close after. The dorms are colonized within seconds; sleeping bags spill out of duffle bags. A snake of beer cans follows the *vendangeurs* inside, as if they were newlyweds.

They have just left a harvest further south. They have all worked at least one season at the château. They are all French, somewhere in their twenties, in jeans, some with dreadlocks. During the winter they draw social welfare, and in the late summer months they migrate from region to region earning their keep at harvest. They pull out bread and wine. Have I eaten?

As the night wears on I make my excuses. I climb into bed wearing all the clothes I brought with me. I take out the pashmina, which had been a gift from a summer work experience student and drape it across the bed. Amid the turrets of rising smoke, a massive ghetto blaster blares; music bounces off concrete for the rest of the week.

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The next morning we wake to the sound of mobile phone alarms across the dorm. The two women sleeping to my right have pushed their beds together. There is a couple in the bed across from me, their sleeping bags zipped together; a man sits up to light a joint before stepping into his boots. Everyone swear and coughs, and it feels as if we were setting out from a mountain hut.

We sit down to long wooden benches and after breakfast we sign contracts. A group of older *vendangeurs* gathers; locals lean their feet on the rear bumpers of old saloon cars to lace up their boots. They look like hikers, enthusiastic to get going.

The *chef de vendange* greets each of us every morning, sixty odd *vendangeurs* by name, gripping the men with a handshake, kissing each of the women. He runs the harvest without ever raising his voice; his humour goes a long way. As the days wear

on, and backs and limbs are exhausted, no one whinges, no one asks if we're finished yet.

We are to start on Merlot, the first of the varieties to ripen. The main proportion of the wine will be made up of Cabernet Sauvignon, the more tannic, robust grape, which brings colour and weight to the wine, but it will take a further two weeks.

Jancis Robinson says that the best left bank are grown within sight of the river, and we can see the Gironde in the distance as we set out across the estate. After a short while we stop at a row of vines. We are each issued with a set of secateurs to keep for the duration of the harvest, and a plastic bucket about twice the size of a shoe box to be handed back for cleaning every evening. We are dispatched in pairs. I am teamed up with one of the newer harvesters; I copy everything he does. In my ignorance, I had assumed that you pulled off each grape one by one, the way you would pick blackberries. We take bunches that hang about hip height in our left hand, cut them from the vine with our right (the way you might prune a rosebush) and drop the fruit into the basket. Before long, you could hear the rhythmic snip of secateurs. It looks easy.

We bow before the vines. I am standing on some of the most prestigious land in the wine world. We may as well be harvesting diamonds such is my reverence for the fruit. I cut everything in sight. After each row is finished, supervisors patrol up and down like officers with sniffer dogs.

The prices of the Bordeaux *crus* are listed like the FTSE index on the back pages of *Decanter*. I'm not sure how the pay structure will work on the ground. I wonder will the cutters who work fastest be paid a bonus, will we be paid by weight? We pick slowly, and over the snip, snip of the secateurs you could hear chatter and laughing. We are so slow that before we've reached half way, two harvesters from our dorm appear at the end of our row and snip their way towards us without complaint.

The *porteurs* receive the grapes in huge rigid baskets tied to their backs. Their baskets are fire engine red, each printed with a number, M15, M21. They have old-fashioned leather straps that you might bring to a shoe mender. They must chafe



around the shoulders: on the second day, one of the *porteurs* has laced a towel around the straps.

When your basket is full, you call out *porteur* the way the chef would shout *service* in the kitchen. We watch the *porteurs*' shoulders bobbing up and down over the vines. They can't lean down with the weight on their backs, so you have to stretch to tip in the contents of your bucket.

It takes about fifteen minutes to cut a row, and when we get to the end we lie on the side of the paths, knees poking up, eyes closed, our faces turned up to the sun, the back of our heads propped up against plastic baskets as if they were pillows.

The *porteurs* carry the last of the fruit after the stragglers are done, reaching up to tip their baskets into the tractor reversed up alongside us. Everyone chats: the *vendangeurs*, the *porteurs* and the tractor drivers. Older ladies sit on stools on the back of the tractor, sorting through the fruit, throwing away anything that doesn't meet the standard. They sit elevated as if they are part of a pageant and their float has stopped to survey a section of the vineyard.

I want to know which were old vines, *vieilles vignes*, that produce high quality fruit, but low yields. Every time we move to a new patch I stop and ask how old are the vines. Some of them are knotted and gnarled. I am slowing down the work; I get vague answers; about thirty years, maybe fifty years old. One of the *vendangeurs* says she and her boyfriend worked at the château in July on the green harvest, when they cut back the fruit, leaving only the healthiest bunches, *les plus jolies*, so that the plant could focus its energy on the remaining fruit.

Around noon we stop for lunch and head toward the château, hunched and slightly hushed. *Mangez-bien*, says the *chef de vendangeurs*. Over lunch we help ourselves to wine from the bottles set out on each table. When we return everyone asks, *Vous avez bien mangé?* It is never a rhetorical question. The duck was terrific, wasn't that a great salad?

I have been wearing a trail up and down to the tractor when I cut my hands, afraid that blood might pollute the wine. By the end of the day my fingers are covered with the same blue plasters we wore in cookery school, easily spotted if they fell into the food.

Everyone's good humour amazes me; strangers converse graciously. *Vous êtes du coin?* my partner asks one of the older men. The day is long, but it passes companionably. Around 5 p.m. we finish up. We put our hands at the base of our spine and stretch back like patients on the maternity ward. The *vendangeurs* walk up the slight incline towards the château, carrying empty baskets in the crook of their elbows like handbags. Some throw their arms around each other, others carry a coat hung from a finger over their shoulder. The stones are bleached in the sun so it looks as if *vendangeurs* are coming off a shingly beach: *vacances plages*.

I try every position to see which causes the least pain. I copy the seasoned harvesters who get down on their hunkers, crouching down towards the fruit, but this hurts your knees, so I end up leaning over from the waist down. I decide to copy the harvesters who bend their knees, but I trip on my laces crossing the concrete floor of the bathroom. The next day I end up kneeling on the soft soil at the vines like an exhausted soldier.

\*

After a few days on the vines I make it into the cellar. First of all, breakfast, says Didier, a slightly built, boyish looking cellar hand. Talking over my protests that I've already eaten, he takes a glass, writes my name in marker and pours in an inch of red wine. He introduces his colleague, Richard, a younger man with a round, smiling face. Richard has to eat a full one of these every day, says Didier, lifting a dried *saussicon*, and slapping Richard's belly. When he hears the door open, Didier whistles, pointing to his shoulders. *Le chef*, he says.

I follow the *maître de chai* through the cellar, writing down the figures he calls out as he pours juice from the huge stainless steel tanks. He lifts test tubes to the light,

recording temperatures and sugar levels. I have to get him to check I've recorded the numbers properly. *Parfait*. By the end of the week it is routine.

You can hear the beep, beep as the tractor reverses into the reception area and tips out each load. The grapes tumble through a destemming machine, they spin around to emerge onto the sorting table, *le tri*. Didier and I stand on either side, removing any foreign objects from the fruit as it passes along the conveyer belt. After a while the movement would become a meditation, so that we become extensions of the machine, as our hands reach out to grasp any rotten fruit and twigs. Over the course of the morning the white bucket at my wellingtons fills with stalks, a snail and the occasional spider.

*C'est la maladie*, says the driver when I ask what was wrong with the wizened fruit he has thrown into my bucket. I don't say that I cut and carried plenty of bunches darker and drier than that, grapes with the hydration status of sultana. I cut every bunch in sight. I knew that *botrytis cinera*, noble rot, that shrivels the grape is encouraged in the Semillon grape further south. Noble rot concentrates sugars, giving complex unctuous sweet wine like Châteaux d'Yquem. It seemed like a waste to leave anything behind, knowing the care that had gone into the fruit, but unless you are harvesting in Sauternes these bunches are meant to be left behind.

I don't want to keep consulting the dictionary, so I do my best to keep up as we chat. Last year, says Didier, I found a ring, pointing to his wedding finger and my eyes widen. I imagine someone with worse secateurs skills than mine. I picture a severed digit, pink at the edges, like a sausage that has been taken off the barbecue before it is cooked, with pink meat, blood and sinews spilling out the end.

Richard sends me up the steps to the top of the stainless steel tanks. I take the hose, which my hand can't quite close around, and point it down inside the tank, to break the crust of skins which has formed on the top. Punching down, breaking the cap, I learn later is an important part of the vinification process to extract the colour and tannin. As I stand there, I imagine the monks doing this by foot.

There is great heat rising off the fruit; it looks like a giant cauldron of strawberry jam. When fermentation occurs, sugar and yeast combine to release alcohol, heat and carbon dioxide. There are casualties every year when winemakers are overcome by fumes. Be careful says Richard, don't lean over the tank.

I keep an eye on the map. Each section of the estate is coloured according to grape variety. The Merlot is all in. Each time the fruit has been harvested from a section it is hatched in colour. I used to spend hours colouring in conveyancing maps in pencil as an apprentice solicitor. As the week progresses, I watch the Cabernet Franc come in in sections. The Petit Verdot and the Cabernet Sauvignon are yet to be picked.

The *maître de chai* takes me into the bottling room, as I won't be here when the wine will be taken from the barrels. Wine has been bottled at the château since the 1970s. He shows me around the cellars and the tasting room. The châteaux in Bordeaux invite buyers to taste by appointment. These are not for wine tourists; there are no aprons for sale like you might see in New World wineries. There are no restaurants attached to the châteaux with views of the Gironde.

The *maître de chai* talks his way through the top vintages and asks me to point out the *millésime* of my birth. I hear you have a big day coming up, he says. Didier brings in champagne. The *maître de chai*, the manager of the château, Richard and Didier, raise a glass, four days before my fortieth birthday.

Two of the *porteurs*, identical twins, are also about to turn forty. We sit around outside the dorm before dinner in the evenings. The twins talk about planetary influences which they say are auspicious. One morning at breakfast, one of the two says that he tried to wake me the night before. I couldn't be roused, he says. I can't tell the two apart, so I don't know which one to avoid.

I follow the cellar workers around, writing down as fast as I can in my notebook, dictionary to hand. Didier chats away companionably as we sort the fruit which comes in every thirty minutes. He talks about what pairs well with foie gras, what works well with which cheese, what he has in his own cellar, what he has been keeping for special occasions. I can't stop to write down what he is saying, but what

I am learning for the first time seems to come naturally to someone who was born here. I am trying to catch up on a lifetime of knowledge.

As the week progresses, it remains cool inside the cellar; the grapes need to be handled quickly to avoid spoilage. The winery is like the pastry section of a kitchen, cold, and scrupulously clean. The machines are taken apart and the whole area hosed down at the end of the day.

The density, sugar concentrations and temperature are recorded for each delivery of new fruit. Temperatures are rising outside on the chart as the grapes arrive in. The day we started I had a lightweight rain jacket tied around my waist as the sky had suggested it might even rain. Temperatures are now well into the thirties. The *vendangeurs* stay still good-humoured; peels of laughter drift out of the dorm over lunch.

In bed I might look across the room to see one of the harvesters taking a break from partying and see a half lit rollie between their lips. I lie there, willing sleep to follow, wondering if concrete is flame resistant. If we burn to a cinder, I'm not sure if it would be for fear of speaking in less than perfect French or the fear of sounding like a prude.

They couldn't have been friendlier. They would yell from the car, do you want a lift into Pauillac? Do you want anything from the shop? They return with wine in five litre plastic tanks you might carry diesel in. The others sit outside, smoking, a red rose in an empty green bottle at their feet. I walk around the estate as the light falls and the pink and purple rise up through the sky. I have been reading about the different wine areas in the regions. Entre-Deux-Mers keeps coming into my mind; I too feel in between stages of life.

After dinner on my last night, one of the group comes in and sits at the end of my bed. He says he had gone on strike as a student to protest at conditions in university; later he dropped out. He had done charity work in Peru. What do you do at home? he asks. I'm a lawyer, I say. His eyes light up; we seem to have reached common

ground. What kind of work do you do? he asks. I defend doctors, I tell him. *Tu es déguelasse*, he says, you're disgusting.

\*

The day I fly back we get together at 'coffee' time. Denis, the *maître de chai* joins us. He opens the 2007 and the 2008 wines. The *maître* looks at me expectantly, as if I am about to make a pronouncement. They're really good, I say, not knowing what I ought to say. He laughs; the wines need time to settle, they aren't yet ready to drink. *Elle aime les vins bien forts*, he says.

They have set out the top of the barrel with *saucisson*, bread, cheese and *rillettes de porc*. If someone was leaving our office, we would gather in the kitchen, perhaps someone might have brought in a cake. Here we're cutting into cheese, pouring an inch of dark wine into our glasses. Richard takes a knife out of his pocket, the way a gardener might. Instinctively, he marks the back of the baguette with a cross. He is not religious; he watched his grandmother do it. I keep seeing the reverence with which they treat the produce of the land.

One afternoon, we had stood chatting as we removed foreign objects from the sorting table, Didier had looked up and asked, *vous êtes mariée?* When I asked him, he said, *oui, de temps en temps*. I have a profound sense that Didier, like the others I met that week are part of the cycle of life on the land. They have seen changes in ownership, changes in price and reviews; every year they are part of the same cycle. After the harvest, the vines will be grubbed up, the wood cut back, and kept to barbecue meat. Didier had described the smoky flavours that will come off the wood, what they will drink with the meat, what they will hold over for cheese and for dessert.

Several men arrive unannounced from the parent company, the bank, just as we are about to lift a glass. It is slightly embarrassing. You've met the student from Ireland, the *maître* says. I speak to the younger banker who's doing the WSET exams I plan to do as soon as I return. Later, when I sit the exams, I learn that financial houses own vast amounts of the châteaux in the Médoc. Every autumn, as the farmers lace up their boots against the back of their cars, I suspect that it makes little difference

where the deeds to this land are held. They will keep walking between these vines, dropping bunches into their baskets. They have been making wine on the site since the year 1662, over two hundred years before the classification of the top five left bank growths, or *crus*. This is their territory; this is their terroir.

By the time I collect my rucksack the weather has broken. The *vendangeurs* have moved on. They have heard that there is a few days' work at one of the Rothschild properties. The dorm is empty, as though it has been stripped by locusts. By the time they come back to cut the Cabernet Sauvignon I will have given back my secateurs and my bucket, and my apron from the *chai*. I will have I returned to the office.

Left bank wines are considered the wines of the intellectual. Cedar box, leather, meat, tobacco, black fruit and blackberry are all descriptors in St-Estèphe tasting notes. The wines are said to be 'unapproachable', they need years to open up; they reward decanting and the best vintages should be cellared for decades.

Wines will be vinified from the separate parcels, the Merlot (which I cut), Petit Verdot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, each section that had been coloured on the map in highlighter pen. Months after I leave, the chief winemaker will make decisions on the *assemblage*, the blend.

I will have made a start on the wine exams. I will have started French conversation classes; the teacher will tell me that I have come home, without realizing it, swearing like a soldier.

The spring following harvest, when the wine is still in oak barrels, the wine trade will descend on Bordeaux for the *en primeur* tastings. Buyers and wine writers will taste the wine and their comments will inform the prices set. The wine will be sold *en primeur*. The purchasers will buy a future interest in the wine, taking a risk that the price will hold or rise by the time the wine is bottled. The 2009 vintage will be heralded as the vintage of the century. When I email Colm he will write, they say this year is the best yet, but the Bordelais say that every vintage.

The spring following harvest, I will contact a broker in Dublin and buy two cases in bond. By the time the wines are released I will have left the practice, but I don't know any of this as the châteaux names and the cantilevered fishing nets flash past the window on the way back to Pauillac station.



## Chapter 4

### Mind the Gap

My car wears a path to a garden centre on the outskirts of Dublin. Saturdays are spent lifting bags of compost out of the boot. I have lined wooden wine boxes with black plastic bags and put in stones for drainage. I have hung boxes off the side of the balcony, experimenting to see what angle will catch the sun. I begin to notice how the plants behave differently, even in such a small area. I notice how seedlings seem to shoot up in the heat behind the glass panels, how the bay tree gives shelter from the wind. I watch what grows where and why and think of terroir.

Every flower that grows is edible. The chives have spiked into perfect spheres, their tiny purple petals giving a sweet sharp bite to salads. They look pretty cut as flowers for the table, but after a while the water turns cloudy; the apartment takes on the dank, savoury smell of onions, and I have to throw them out.

The balcony had once been quite smart, before I started drilling shelves into the wall, piled high with old tea caddies with curry plant, parsley, coriander, spilling out over the side, and pots full of nasturtiums. The wooden boxes look best, but water starts to seep through, the wood creaks and buckle at the corners, gradually the boxes come apart. The tea caddies start to rust. There are plastic tubs on the angled windowsills, but when I come in from work a gust of wind has carried soil through the apartment. A layer of earth lies across my papers and for months it falls from the spines of hardbacks. The balcony begins to encroach on the apartment.

By midsummer the balcony is infested, tiny transparent aphids line up along the stalks of the chives. You can see them moving in slow motion through the macro lens of the camera, like cars stuck in traffic. If I set the table outside, I have to stack up the boxes so that the balcony resembles the inside of my office. A friend who works as a commercial property lawyer says the balcony is overloaded; she says there will be a weight bearing limit in the lease.

\*

Before the sabbatical I remember looking out my office window and noticing that the leaves had fallen; autumn was passing by. Back at work, my diary no longer marks out the full moon. My office diary marks up targets and deadlines. Time has begun to speed up again. Instead of writing by hand, I am dictating everything.

I begin wine classes; I sit three wine exams back to back. I spend weekends in my study highlighting passages on wine regions. The third exam involves tasting 'blind', which means we will be presented with a sample without knowing anything about it. My annual leave is spent studying for wine exams. I watch my Ballymaloe friend Viki stick her nose right into the glass as she tastes. She closes her eyes. I start to follow her. Time slows down, comes to a stop for a moment, as you put your nose into the glass. You return to the present.

In the evenings I read book after book, the way a smoker lights one cigarette off the last. I read Jay McInerney, Auberon Waugh and Jancis Robinson on wine. I want to read it as well as drink it; I want to understand it. I am starting to think about where grapes make their home and what they need to survive. I begin to consider wine as a marker of identity. My father buys me a small wine fridge. It hums in the spare bedroom which is now a study. I start to look at masters programmes in the UK

I go to a literary festival on the work of Elizabeth Bowen. I sit in the chilly chapel at her family home, Bowen's Court, in Cork, as an American academic gives a paper from the pulpit, quoting *Seven Winters*, Bowen's autobiographical essays. As a young girl Bowen considered 'Ireland' and 'island' as one and the same. Wasn't every island an Ireland? She asked.

I had taken a lift to Bowen's Court that afternoon. When we introduced ourselves, I learned I was in the car of the Irish republican writer Danny Morrison. I observe this dance between strangers, where each question is really asking, are you of my tribe? I wonder on which island (or Ireland) this conversation is taking place. Morrison has placed me as 'other', misdirected by my name, my education and my hometown. I smile as I think of the invisible terroir of Northern Irish political identity. I think I

should lighten the conversation and turn to the back seat. I ask his wife which part of the States she is from. She says, Canada.

\*

I accept a place on the MA in Biography at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. Biography, I learn, is no longer considered as the cradle to grave study of a human subject. I want to write about wine as a marker of identity.

Over coffee and cakes in the office I propose a vote of thanks to colleagues and partners. I thank especially the trainee solicitors, over whom I served as master. I read from an email received from one of my earliest trainees, a message wishing bon voyage to his first mistress.

I show the estate agent around my apartment. The plant boxes have been stacked in my sister's garden shed, the hanging boxes have gone to charity shops; all that remains on the balcony is a table and two chairs. There are cigarettes stuck between the stone slabs, fossilized remnants from parties where people stepped outside. I imagine him, the tenant (although I don't yet know it will be a him) out here as the sky turns orange, pink and purple over the park.

\*

In Norwich, I find an apartment in a Victorian redbrick building with a turret. It was the old Norwich & Norfolk Hospital. I had envisaged that postgraduate college life existed in the form of a permanent drinks party, books stacked up as backdrop to conversations that could have strayed from any of Woody Allen's Manhattan films. I imagined wine, perhaps even bow ties. I hang a disco ball up high; light sprinkles over my paper like stardust. When friends come over for dinner they say my apartment stands in the old xray department of the hospital. Someone else says it was the psychiatric unit.

Every so often I fly back to teach in the Law School in Dublin. I make hurried calls from airport lounges, apologising to friends for running out of time. I attempt to cram weeks into days. I am trailing fragments of my life back and forth. I think of how Elizabeth Bowen felt most at home on the Irish Sea.

\*

In publishing class I write a paper on Robert Parker's success. I research how he created a space for himself, how he educated a generation of wine consumers. I learn how trade as well as consumers consult the marking system Parker devised. I learn how Parker marks wines out of 100, how these points, Parker Points, became the benchmark which informed purchases first in the US, then worldwide. I learn how he insured his sense of smell (without a sense of smell, we can taste nothing), how he became known as the Million Dollar Nose. I learn how Parker Points are criticised for favouring Parker's own palate, how he prefers the high alcohol reds of Napa and the Rhône. Parker Points have influenced markets across the world. I learn how he was awarded the *Légion d'honneur* for services to French wine and how he was savaged by the vineyard dog at Cheval Blanc on the right bank of Bordeaux after filing a critical review of the château.

The paper is due to be submitted shortly, but I need details of the jurisdictions where his books have been published; I send an email to his assistant. I receive a response directly from Parker himself. I have made contact with the Million Dollar Nose. I have received a message from the Oracle at Delphi.

\*

I meet Stephen Skelton, MW, Master of Wine, one of the students on my MA course at UEA. He is the leading expert in English Wine; he consults for most of the vineyards across the UK. I already have his book on viticulture. He teaches MW students in his house in West London. He invites me to attend; another master, inviting me into this world of wonder.

The light is flowing through the kitchen ceiling, reflecting off the glasses, casting diamond patterns across the tables. Twelve samples are set out in semi circles for each student. Stephen looks up at the clock, and says, right. Exam conditions. Two hours fifteen minutes. Your time starts now.

I want to continue learning and writing about wine. The MA becomes a doctorate. I sign up for the WSET Diploma, the wine trade qualification which I know stretches over two years. I imagine it somehow as a sideline, rather than taking the better part of those two years.

I head to London in search of tastings. I meet a woman on the Heathrow Express and within ten minutes I have agreed to cat sit in South East London, home for the next two summers.

I watch police boats pass along the Thames. I look up at helicopters overhead; the neighbours say they are property speculators; there are cranes everywhere. I watch barges pull coal along the surface of the water. I watch commuters spill onto the KPMG riverboat across the way at Canary Wharf. The buildings transmit signals like smugglers with torches. I look across to the Barclays building, to the conical pointed buildings that blink messages in morse code. I think of the lawyers sitting in boardrooms across the water.

It is a harvest moon. The water level is very low, the land below lies like a beach as though the river has been unplugged.

## Chapter 5

### Pinot Fest

WELCOME TO THE MIDDLE OF MIDDLE EARTH reads the sign at Wellington Airport. I have been learning about terroir across Europe as part of the WSET diploma. I have come back to learn about New Zealand's terroir. I have come to attend a conference at Te Papa, the Museum of New Zealand. Te Papa, meaning *Our Place* in Maori.

This is my first wine conference. I have learned from the Diploma that you are supposed to avoid coffee, which deadens the palate, and that perfume should never be worn as you (and others) will smell (and therefore taste) nothing else. Even lipstick isn't advised as it leaves a mark on the wineglass. (In cookery school we weren't allowed to wear nail varnish.) I set out my things for this conference unlike any other I've ever attended, everything stripped back.

My diploma notes say that climate is what is supposed to happen, whereas weather is what actually happens. My diary merges into tasting notes during the conference; I observe an obsession with the weather, with southerlies, as if we are sea scouts listening to the shipping news. This reliance on the forecast feels foreign – I never do this at home – it feels as though I might as well be looking at the star signs.

As I draw the curtains, a moon hangs heavy over Oriental Bay.

\*

I have just come down from Gisborne, north of Hawkes Bay, where I interviewed James Millton, a passionate biodynamic producer. His wines are said to show a luminosity that biodynamics can offer.

We're not standing on dirt, we're standing on the ceiling of another kingdom, Millton had said as we stood in his vineyard. Biodynamics, he says, is the study of life (bio) and energy (dynamic). Biology is all about the life of the vine and the land and the terroir and the place and therefore then how do you bring that life to the fore by putting it in the glass, he says. I have just sat my viticulture and viniculture exams. In viticulture you learn about pests and diseases, Millton says, but nobody teaches you about how to make the plant healthy. As he sets to explaining the terroir, he says, chooks don't eat those grapes.

The terroir here, he says, is Manuke Gisborne, based on fine silt from young geology and heavier clays which have ability to enhance microlife in the soil. He talks about what happens below the earth's surface, as if it is another world. It feels as though we are characters in Alice in Wonderland. As the interview ends the speech fades into birdsong.

I wonder if I am attracted to biodynamic wine because it opens a deeper, more intense, path into nature. I think of Millton asking the birds not to eat his fruit. I think of the supremacy of nature, of the bodies of the pests that are burned and sprayed onto the vines to deter others. The nets which look like wedding dresses, the shotguns which fire sporadically over the vines like military salutes or farmers warning predators away from their land or their daughters.

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A tribal chief stands on the stage at Wellington Town Hall for the *powhiri*, the formal Maori welcome. He wears fur-lined robes, like a university don or a monarch at his coronation. A long grey feather hangs down his back. Warriors step forward, shaking their hands the way a child mimes a fish. Their song is sweet and rhythmic; it sounds like an incantation. A delegate's guide dog jumps to attention; he barks, preparing to protect his owner from attack. The Maori men lay down a grass frond; if the flower is picked up, the visitors have come in peace.

Hello. My name is Sam: I am a New Zealand Pinotphile, says the keynote speaker. Sam Neill, actor, and winegrower, whose vineyard, Two Paddocks is based in

Alexandra, Central Otago. *Bastard*, he says. I'd like to elucidate on that word. In New Zealand and Australia it is often a term of affection. It's all in the tone, he says. You never use the word for a woman. Never, Jancis Robinson, she's a terrific bastard. He addresses us, the delegates, as bastards of Pinot Noir. New Zealanders, he says, are the bastards, the unwanted, unacknowledged offspring, outside of the Big House.

Burgundy is the yardstick against which Pinot worldwide is judged. I have spent the last week learning about the terroir of Burgundy, 'the Big House'.

Give thanks, says Neill, to the generations of Burgundy monks and peasants, to those who planted the first grapevines in New Zealand. To the pioneers: McKenna, Mills, Peytons, Brady and Bauer. Tread carefully, he says, you are honoured to tread in their footsteps.

Sam Neill's rollcall of names includes the men Schuster had told me to seek out: Bauer and Mills. Mills had addressed the 2007 Pinot Noir conference in Wellington:

If the land could speak, the first thing it would tell you is that it doesn't really want 5000 vines per hectare on its back. That's about the last thing it wants – it happens nowhere in nature. If that is your goal, you must offer something in return. When creating a relationship on these terms, one starts to see the problems on the property as not just an intrusion or a weakness that needs to be combated or corrected, but land asking you something.

I watch Mills address the room in shorts and bare feet. His wines are biodynamically produced; Mills says they show luminosity. At the tasting, they are light and silky and serious. These grapes were grown on vines cloned from Danny Schuster's vines. My notes say, Sharing. Shorts. Sandals. Sakar's *Pinot Noir, The New Zealand Story* says, 'Few on the New Zealand Pinot scene are as passionate as Mills about the importance of conversing Cistercian-like with the land, and few make such singular and honest expressions of Pinot Noir.'

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Pinot is known as *the* terroir grape. Sakar writes, 'It's aromatic brilliance can only be realized in cooler climates on the margins of grape-growing lands.' He calls Pinot producers 'dreamers, free spirits, sensualists, poets, hippies, obsessives.' He says, 'Theirs is a winemaking subculture notable for its hunger to find out more, to share ideas, to taste and compare terroirs.' Sakar says of Pinot producers, 'their goal is not so much to make the best wines possible as to make the most truthful wines possible.'

\*

I love conferences. I love watching colleagues interact with each other. I love learning from people who are leaders in their field. My right and left brain seem to dance together during presentations. The right side of my brain records what the speaker is saying, and the left part wanders into dreamtime. I make notes of things I would like to do; it feels like a health check. Back here again, I seem to be a less complicated version of myself. Here means New Zealand, but it means Otago in particular. Today, I could be standing in Otago.

I love the energy in the room. There are men reading figures into their phones as though they are on the trading floor. The leading writers of the wine world are here; Oz Clarke is writing notes on a clipboard. Rudi Bauer is here. Blair Walter, winemaker at Felton Road is here, Sam Neill is here, with Dean Shaw his winemaker. The Dicey brothers of Mount Difficulty are here, Chris Keys of Gibbston Valley is here. Grant Taylor, Brady's first winemaker at Gibbston is here. Duncan Forsythe (BIG CHEESE) of Mount Edward is here.

The winemakers talk about the three periods of Otago history: the Maori settlers, the gold rush, then the modern pioneers of pinot, Alan Brady and Rolf Mills, the men at Chard Farm, the godfathers. Then the young guns, Two Paddocks (Sam Neill is in the corner of the room pouring his wine). The winemakers moved into Bannockburn in the early '90s. The speakers say the place shapes the wine, but people shape the wine. People live here by choice. The place is refractive. The schist radiates light.

Rudi says this place entertains you. These winemakers are hikers and skiers and risk takers. This place is a part of history, he says.

The winemakers have devised a Master of Central competition. Each day a winner will be chosen; one will be drawn from a hat to return to the Pinot Celebration in Queenstown the following January. As part of the blind tasting we are asked to identify which wines had been made by a mountain biker, a diver and a skier. There is a sense of living on the edge in Otago, of pushing boundaries, a sense of searching.

There are questions posted around the room. I have read the history of this area, but the *Wine Atlas of New Zealand* is back in the hotel room. There is great collaboration; some delegates are working in pairs. I have coaxed and cajoled answers from all around the room. I talk to a sommelier who looks like he might know what he's talking about; we agree to share. I give him my answers; he disappears off to lunch.

The winemakers talk about their annual gathering in Hanmer Springs in the South Island, inspired by the winemakers in Oregon. The press are excluded so winemakers are free to speak out, to collaborate and to learn. They say that when you go to that meeting you leave your ego at the door. It seems to me that you do the same thing at New Zealand Immigration. The left part and right part of my brain have become tangled up; they are arguing with each other. I want to collaborate, but I also want to win.

I have a certificate that reads:

#### MASTER OF CENTRAL

Be it known by these here present that the person named below has answered questions diverse on Central Otago and Waitaki with alacrity, accuracy, and perceptiveness and in so doing has made it clear to those judging such matters that they shall be, from this point forward, entitled to name themselves a Master of Central. They shall be entitled to request from any

indentured winemaker of the region a free glass of Pinot Noir and may wear the Central Otago official T-shirt at such times as they shall choose.

Signed, Duncan Forsyth

Director

Pinot Noir 2013.

The sommelier's name is read out alongside mine. That bastard took all my answers, and he didn't even credit me in his acceptance, I say to Rudi. He says, don't be so European.

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Pinot Fest takes place every four years. It focuses on three regions: Otago, Marlborough and the 'Pioneers' Regions' encompassing Martinborough, Nelson and Waipara (the area where I met Schuster). The wines from the Pioneers' Regions are set out in Te Papa Museum. The early pioneers are commemorated in black and white photos posted around the room. I see images of Danny Schuster on the vineyards going back decades but no one seems to know where he is.

Martinborough sits at the south of the North Island; it is home to a number of the early pioneers: Larry McKenna, and Clive Paton of Ata Rangi. Because of the way the islands are positioned there is no shelter here; the area is the first land the wind hits after Antarctica. The wines are known for their structure – the winds mean that the fruit has thicker skins, stronger tannins. Martinborough is a blacker expression of Pinot with briary and brambly fruit. Now, an influx of winemakers in Martinborough is breaking new ground. A former Japanese diplomat takes scissors to individually select each grape. Those wines show an extraordinary intensity and concentration.

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Pinot is now planted out across Marlborough the top of the South Island. I am surprised there is so much focus on Pinot in this region. Marlborough Sauvignon still accounts for the vast majority of the country's exports. Someone calls it 'bitch

diesel', but it is thanks to Sauvignon that we are here.

Journalists type at conversation speed, like court stenographers, as winemakers present on the history of the region. Marlborough has been under vine for forty years, in viticultural terms it is still in its infancy. Surrounded by water; it has a moderate climate, influenced by mild temperatures. It is in the early 40s latitude, and the weather comes from the west, where it picks up moisture. There is a fall of rain from the west, and the grapes benefit from a strong dry wind; the canopies are well ventilated and disease-free. The area is protected from the wet and cold and has dry growing conditions. The light is bright, contributing to bright expression of fruit. In terms of topography the land is sloped and angled. Journalists' keyboards sound out, like metronomes on fast tempo as I hear that cool temperatures mean the fruit can hang all autumn to ripen. Pinot requires a long ripening time and winemakers can pick mid to late autumn in a long gradual process. The sounds of bagpipes swirl up from the sea front as the conversation moves to recent vintages; someone says, I think we should pay off that busker; Scotland the Brave moves on. We move to the tasting room.

I meet Kevin Judd, one of the men responsible for putting New Zealand on the viticultural map. He was winemaker at Cloudy Bay but he produces now under his own label, Greywacke, named after its terroir. I have tasted his Wild Sauvignon, using only natural yeast: it is much more complex, serious wine than what Schuster had called the Marilyn Monroe Marlborough Sauvignons. Judd too, I find restrained, a man happy to let the wine talk for him. Greywacke Pinots are silky, with sour cherry notes, some pepper and a good finish.

Seresin Estate's wines are a revelation. They are silky smooth, crimson wines with a hint of pepper on nose; I taste sour cherry; these are serious wines. They have great acidity, clarity, a savoury quality and beautiful balance.

They had talked of smooth, soft, silky tannins, rather than big masculine tannin at the presentation but as I make my way around the room I become aware of my gums. They feel as though they are pulsating, and I wonder if they are fluorescent; I feel as if my teeth don't exist.

Schuster had told me about Hätsch Kalberer, a Swiss winemaker, who is showing two single vineyard wines to express the different terroirs. Both were produced organically, both were made almost identically. They show different soil expression: the Clayvin Vineyard grown on clay, the Fromm Vineyard on layers of silt and alluvial gravel. These are serious wines with a savoury note; they have a great finish.

Schuster had spoken of another Swiss producer, Hans Herzog who was pushing the boundaries with experimental plantings of grapes from Italy to Russia. Herzog is a guy who's always in the vineyard – if you shake his hand, you'll know it, his assistant says. Herzog reminds me of my uncles who are farmers; he is a decent man, taciturn and quiet with huge hands. My tasting notes say he talks through his wines.

I am greatly taken by Te Whare Ra's wines. They show smoke, pepper, rich ripe fruit and good length. My notes say the Maori Marae, or meeting place, is 'where you stand'. The closest New Zealand word for terroir translates from Maori as 'arse place'.

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All five hundred delegates gather in Wellington Town Hall where tables of eight are laid out for a tutored Burgundy tasting. We sit in silence; the only sound is the clinking of crystal. It sounds like a harbour in the evening, the sail boats' rigging clanking as the water laps up against the boats. The winemaker beside me says, it sounds like a Buddhist temple in here.

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I fly south, to Otago.

When I meet Rudi at his vineyard at the Bendigo site, they have been out since dawn, spraying the 501 biodynamic mixture, made up of ground quartz, which is sprayed over the wines at autumn equinox.

I am starting to read the land, to taste geography. Rudi lifts a quartz rock from the site, the stone which reflects light and allows the vines to drain. Rudi says, this land has loneliness, an isolation. After a few months of diploma study I can see how the vineyard is mid-slope, the best viticultural land. It allows movement of air down the slope; the fruit will not be at risk of fungal disease, and not overly exposed to wind at the top of the slope. The hills look as if they had been squashed together and where the mini valleys appear, they look like a large lady who has crossed her thighs. Lake Dunstan is sparkling in the sun.

I spend the night in Queenstown. I stop outside the old convent house; it is uninhabited now. I think of the Dominicans who offered me hospitality back in the '90s. I think of Sr Celia offering me the front room with a balcony overlooking the lake. There are chairs stacked up at the windows. I could sit down and cry.

I check in at a motel a little closer to the lake. I tell the man at the desk about the convent house. He says, oh, I know, I did piano lessons there fifty years ago; now let's see what we can do for you. He gives me a room looking out over the water. I can hear the sounds of the gears on tourist buses struggling up the hill. I make my own little pilgrimage down to Fergburger. The burger is double wrapped in foil and sealed like an old-fashioned freight package and stamped LONG HAUL.

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I spend Waitangi Day with the Wild Irishman, Alan Brady. Waitangi Days marks the signing of the treaty with the Crown; it is a national holiday. There are ceremonies at Waitangi in the North Island. When I first came to New Zealand I spent a few days up at Waitangi, I walked around the Marae, the Maori gathering place.

Brady and I head to Carrick winery in the Cromwell Basin. The air is filled with the aroma of hot dried herbs, thyme, rosemary and lavender as soon as we step out of the car. We have to raise our voices in the restaurant for the phone to record our interview. After lunch we drive to Brady's plots at Gibbston and Bannockburn. For the first time, I watch a winemaker pull the white plastic bung from the top of the

barrel. I watch him dip a plastic syphon that resembles the instrument farmers use for artificial insemination. I watch as he syphons out samples from individually vinified plots. He will do this again next week, he says to decide whether to blend the wines before bottling.

At Brady's house, he lines up the '09 vintage across his kitchen counter. He had opened the '07s last time I was here. The Three Colleens, named after his daughters, is made from the Gibbston site. It has clean red fruit, the colour showing some age. I can smell, then taste, some dry spices, sour cherries, ripe prunes, dried fruit; it has complexity and good length.

The Bannockburn (from the hotter site) shows red and black fruit on the palate, prune, with cinnamon, and ripe fruit (on the spectrum of Pinot, which tends towards a lighter colour and flavour expression) moving towards raisin.

The blend of both sites, named Macushla after his native County Down, is bottled under cork and shows dark ripe fruit, moving towards liquorice and white pepper, and is the most tannic of the three. For Brady, while the blend is probably the most complete wine, but the two separately vinified wines show their terroir without blending the sense of place. His personal preference, however, is for the Three Colleens, which has a hint of rhubarb. Of the three, it is the lightest in weight, with a silky elegance, a suppleness, a subtlety; it hints at much more. Brady says his preferred expression of Burgundy is Volnay, a wine with fine tannins, a long fine finish, and at times floral hints. The Gibbston wines remind him of Volnay, with dried herbs and earthiness. For him the wine has a transparency: you can see into it.

Brady talks about the generation of young winemakers leaving New Zealand to work the harvest in Europe and Australia, then coming home to New Zealand with overseas experience. He asks if I have spoken to Michelle Richardson, known as the Flying Winemaker.

The next day we drive out to Felton Road. We meet their viticulturist, Gareth King. We put on wellingtons; Brady's black Labrador is allowed to come on condition that

he is clean. The vineyard contains some ungrafted vines, vulnerable to phylloxera, the louse that carries disease, destroying vines across the world.

As we talk out across the vineyard, Brady says, will you take her to the voodoo lounge? Gareth takes us into a hut and opens trap doors to see horse manure in various stages of decomposition. The manure is spooned into cow horns (like ice cream into cones, as Millton had described it) and buried in the vineyard at spring equinox. The other visitor in the party, the vineyard's UK agent asks, can I take one of those back to show my students? They're precious, says King; they are from our own cows; next you'll be asking for one of my children.

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I pull into Gibbston Valley winery, where Chris Keys is chief winemaker. He read Russian at Otago University in Dunedin. He is supposed to speak to the wines during barrel maturation; it is claimed that he recites Wordsworth in Russian. We stand in the cave below the winery.

The setting looks spiritual, almost religious. When I say the tasting table looks like an altar he says, that means more to you than it does to me. I think about our concepts of terroir, the layers of meaning we bring to wine. I think for some reason about students in the colonies, in Africa and the Indies, reading about Wordsworth's daffodils, without any concept of what a daffodil is.

Out in the vineyard I ask him about terroir. It is a privilege, he says, to work amongst vines Brady planted thirty years ago. The fruit from that section is vinified separately and bottled under the label *Le Maître*. A few dried purple bunches lie at the foot of the vines, and beside the symbol of the Gibbston, a rabbit, lies at our feet like a hearth rug.

I hope I'm not completely romanticising this place. I know that land is an issue here. (Where isn't it?) When I watched the news on Waitangi Day, a Maori protester had spat in the Prime Minister's face at the ceremonial commemoration of the treaty. Under land compensation tribunals all New Zealanders with 1/16<sup>th</sup> Maori heritage



are entitled to compensation for the appropriation of their land by the Paheka, the white European settlers. Earlier in the week I had spent a night in a B&B where the owner had talked all through breakfast. They might as well forget about it, she said. They were glad to get the guns, she said. She stopped in response to the silence, and added, some of our friends are Maoris and they think so too.

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The South Island disappears below my feet on the short flight from Queenstown. I pass Lake Wanaka, other lakes, milky turquoise, with tributaries flowing in or out, like medical tubes; I pass the Southern Alps, I pass Mount Cook, where Edmund Hilary trained for the ascent of Everest. Lakes and mountains and rivers recede into the distance. As we approach the north of the South Island I see the salt planes in shades of pink, like a make-up palette with a selection of blushers, pink, rosé, salmon coloured compacts. Suddenly, we are over water, the Cook Strait between the North and South Island.

I drive up over the mountains from Wellington to Martinborough. I stay with Phyll Pattie and her husband Clive Paton at Ata Rangi winery. Schuster had called Paton 'Poppa Pinot'. Paton is a former rugby international. He was awarded the New Zealand Order of Merit for his work preserving native trees, rata and pohutukawa. I notice his medal pinned up on the kitchen wall, on a hook, without fanfare or frame, beside a lottery ticket.

We go out to dinner. When we come back it is dark. Phil and I ride home on the back of the pickup truck. Clive backs up the truck to give us a good view of the sky and we sit under a carpet of stars while Phil points the Southern Cross and the Milky way, identifying the stars sprinkled across the sky.

Ata Rangi means 'dawn sky, new beginning'. There is nothing between the grapes growing in Martinborough and the wind coming up from the Antarctic. Doesn't the South Island give you some shelter? I ask, and Clive says, have you looked at a map?

I know this is not the safest place to seek shelter. Banks Peninsula and Akaroa where

I spent time on my sabbatical year were badly damaged by the earthquakes that destroyed the centre of Christchurch. The salt mines that we looked down on from Cape Campbell were damaged. As I sat in an Asian restaurant the night before the conference opened in Wellington, I listened to others talking about claims on buildings. When people look at property they ask, is it above the tsunami line?

I have made separation anxiety purchases in Unity Bookshop. I wanted to interview Michelle Robertson the 'Flying Winemaker' to get her take on terroir but I have run out of time. The night before I leave, I see Auckland Skytower lit up as the light falls. I see a long cloud formation across the sky, as though a child has drawn steam coming out of an old-fashioned train. Aotearoa, the Maori name for New Zealand, that translates 'land of the long white cloud'.

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If you look at a satellite map of New Zealand the first thing you see is a vast expanse of water; with the exception of Australia you can see nothing but ocean. When our diploma wine lecturer asked what we saw when we looked at the map, we shouted suggestions from the floor. That, said the lecturer, is the definition of a maritime climate. The influence of the sea is important; breezes coming in off the sea keep temperatures cool, they keep the grapes aerated, which shows in the fresh, crisp acidity and clean fruit characteristics. When I looked at that picture, I saw Australia almost four hours away by plane. I saw nothing between it and Antarctica. I looked at those two islands and I saw isolation. Perhaps terroir means there rather than here. Perhaps it means exile, beyond reach. Perhaps it means this is mine, not yours.

I just want to put Otago in a bottle, Grant Taylor had told John Sakar. He defined himself as an Otagophile more than a Pinotophile. At 45° south, the grapes of Otago are the last to be harvested on the planet.

A photograph in Sakar's book catches my eye. Taken at Valli, Taylor's winery, it shows bare legs, stray berries still clinging to ankles after stamping the Pinot ferment. The stainless steel fermentation tank sits in the background, the fermentation details are marked up on a whiteboard. They seem somehow like sums,

how you show your ‘working out’ in a maths exam so the examiners can see that you were on the right path even if your final answer is slightly off.

The first set of diploma results were due out while I was away. I had been afraid to check. In fact, part of me felt like a fraud during the conference, as I thought I would be coming home to a resit. Eventually I log into the WSET website.

I have passed; I am on my way.

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I am scrolling through photographs. I see the Maori warriors in ceremonial fur and feathers, performing the Haka as they open the Pinot Fest. I see Bob Campbell, in his straw hat, his telephoto lens trained on the diving board towering over Wellington Harbour as the winemakers jump into the water. I see Rudi clambering out of harbour in his shorts. I see Phyll from Ata Rangi swinging her jeans around her head (amid claps and whoops) and stepping off the end of the board. Phyll had played the dives on YouTube when I stayed at Ata Rangi, the Chariots of Fire soundtrack in the background. You should have seen the bruise I got afterwards, she said. He’s seeing the chiropractor, she said, as we watched one of the winemakers displace a wave as he makes a crash landing. It was like watching an old movie, the images mapping out the story of the pioneers of Pinot.

I see Emmanuel Bourgignon, son of the French agronomists, recently graduated with a doctorate from Lincoln University, Christchurch, addressing Pinot Fest. I think of his laser gun pointing out the root depths that biodynamic viticulture will allow the vines to reach. The invisible geography, the architectural plans buried underneath the surface of the earth, the archaeology of the future.

I see the sun sparkling across the lake as they sprayed the silica 501 at Quartz Reef. I think about men waiting for the moon.

I see the three iterations of the Wild Irishman 2009 vintage reflected across Alan Brady's quartz kitchen countertop. I think about pioneers putting down roots, putting their faith in the miracle of Pinot.

I see the cow horns and the compost heap at Millton winery. Call ahead as the Blue fin Tuna are just coming around the East Cape and they don't wait for no one, Millton's email had read. Give me two days warning. Travel safely.

I think of that unseasonably hot summer afternoon in Wellington, the windy city, when the winemakers headed to the seafront. One by one, they stepped off the end of the diving board, tumbled and turned through the air. A perfect circle formed as they pierced the surface of the water. I see the winemakers pull off their clothes and leap into the afternoon. The wind had died down when the winemakers looked out across the harbour. I see them poised on the end of the diving board, ready to take a leap of faith. Flying winemakers.

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After the closing gala dinner, I found myself (not exactly invited, but present) at Sam Neill's party at the waterfront in Wellington. Earlier in the week I had attended the gathering of a group of winegrowers who call themselves The Family of XII. In Dunedin I had gone to Mass with the Dominican sisters. I got them to shove up the bench and we sat together in a row at the Holy Family Church. I am thinking about Te Papa, 'our place'. I am thinking of Maori terroir, 'arse place'.

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Better off out here, I have written into my diary. I must have been checking on the residency rules again. I had thought of applying during my MA year, but thought perhaps I should hold off until I finish the doctorate, to get the benefit of further points on the immigration system. I worry if I wait too long my age will work against me. The immigration website has a list of professions the country is seeking. I have written, qualify as hairdresser. I feel like I am negotiating with a lover rather than a country. I could cut hair, I could cut my hair. I could change.

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On the plane, my diary says there is a man reading a Gideon-size Koran beside me. Skin sore today. My bites are purple and filled with blood. My body is not happy to be leaving, I read, as though I could will my body to stop the allergic reactions to bites, as though I could will my system to adapt to the terroir.

The aircraft stops to refuel. The pilot introduces himself in a Dublin accent. There is something sad, I think, as I look around the flight, about the pilot being responsible for hundreds of souls. When I close my eyes, the miles are flying past. Airhostesses walk down the aisles wearing red shoes and cream skirts with darts with red pleats and red and blue pin stripes. The purser, dressed in dark green, comes down to check in on my neighbour, a nine-year-old unaccompanied traveller on her way to Zurich.

I watch the electronic map on the back of the seat in front, as we leave New Zealand airspace, crossing Australia, the 'Stans', India, Asia and Africa, heading back towards Europe. I watch as we catapult across time zones, keeping an eye as the date changes. Happy Valentine's Day, I say to my little neighbour. She says she'd like to be an elf or a hobbit. My diary says Friday Feb. 15<sup>th</sup>. We are losing time.

My first diary entry for the trip had read, full moon with circle around it. I had recorded a magnificent red sky washed across overhead above my aunt's house. I wrote how I had stood in the kitchen with my aunt and another of the sisters. I wrote how I had been tempted to reach out and embrace them in a circle, but for some reason I had held back. I wrote how it brought Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* to mind. I thought of that brief moment of bliss when the women spontaneously start to dance in the kitchen in Friel's story of the Celtic feast of Lughnasa that celebrates the harvest. I want to ask my aunt how it was to travel to New Zealand that first time in the 1950s. This passage into the New World.

## Chapter 6

### Burgundy

When I land in Lyon-Saint Exupéry airport I see references everywhere to *Le Petit Prince* and I think of Burgundy as a place that exists within the imagination of poets and writers. I know something of the lie of the land. I knew the road numbers and the names of the viticultural sites, but still, it seems strange that this place exists in reality.

You could see soil and subsoil from the train window on the way into Lyon, as though someone had sliced into a layered coffee cake. The Cistercians who worked this land upwards of a thousand years back were even said to have *tasted* the soil itself. I am heading towards hallowed ground. I have been reading John Sakar on terroir:

According to Aubert de Villaine, the head of Burgundy's Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, arguably Pinot's most sacred patch: 'Pinot Noir doesn't really have a taste. On its own, it has no interest. It is only interesting if married to a terroir.'

I had planned to head straight for the *autoroute* when I picked up the rental car, but the river of cars made me dizzy so I find myself hugging the side roads, an angry line of traffic trailing behind me. I am hesitant at the wheel, wide eyed, like Woody Allen in a particularly anxious moment. I imagine that every oncoming vehicle might hit me. I am unused to driving in France, but I am too anxious about this trip. I was planning to head north, to the Côte de Beaune, to get my first glimpse of the finest Chardonnays in the world, and further north to the Côte de Nuits, towards Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.

Instead, I head south, for Mâcon.

Travellers arriving into the town used to land in sea planes outside l'Hôtel d'Europe et d'Angleterre; Queen Victoria stayed there, and later the Aga Khan and Marcel Pagnol. I am not on new territory here; I will not be the first to interview any of the winemakers I hope to meet. Elizabeth David, MFK Fisher, Julia Child, Alice Waters, Ruth Reichl have all been here. Jasper Morris and Hugh Johnson, Michael Broadbent, Jancis Robinson and Robert Parker and countless researchers, students and writers had been here before me.

What makes Burgundy so special? our diploma lecturer had asked. We had discussed how the site of the *climat* (the vineyard, or individual field) determines everything – altitude, the degree of slope, aspect. We talked too about vines, and human influence, but *terroir*, the land comes first.

Burgundy's vineyards runs 190 miles from Auxerre, the Chablis area (Chardonnay) through the Côte d'Or, made up of the Côte de Nuits (Pinot) and running south to meet the Côte de Beaune (Chardonnay), then south to the Côte Chalonnaise and the Mâconnais (Chardonnay). South of that lies Beaujolais (Gamay, the black grape that produces light red wines).

I set out from the southern end of Burgundy, into Beaujolais. Brass plaques announce the homes of winemakers. I make my way down the hill, passing the JULIÉNAS sign into the village. The village looks like it had at one stage been a wealthy area. I pass a *tabac* and a butcher's shop, an insurance office and a war memorial. I pass a pharmacy, a bar, with locals sitting outside on plastic tables and two upmarket restaurants. I pass a church with a view across a valley of vines and a decommissioned church that serves as a wine shop.

On the way back up the hill I pass a graveyard behind an imposing stone wall, the gate which frames the ornate gravestones, a tomb and the land in the distance. Juliéнас is one of the most northerly Beaujolais *crus* (the entire vineyard area), and produces a light fruity red, with a bouquet of flowers – violet, rose, and acacia.

I stop to look at the vines. They are untrained, freestanding, they reach up to just below knee level. Granite is infertile, it limits the vine's tendency to overproduce.

There is something slightly lunar about the landscape: the soil is dry and reddish; the bush vines are dry and gnarled; and they look old, but they probably look older than they are.

The first thing you notice is the floral note: violet principally; you might detect red plum, perhaps red cherry. These are fresh, not cooked fruits. I am learning to assess wines in terms of their development. Beaujolais wines tend to go from youthful to tired in one jump, while other wines will develop over time. These wines are youthful, attractive. I note acacia and the winemaker says it grows near the vineyard. Harvest date has been set for September 28<sup>th</sup>.

The wines are light in tannins. The fruit tends to flash past the palate. They are juicy, some show dark plum, sometimes a suggestion of dark cherry, occasionally some black fruit on the finish. Some have a hint of cassis, even blackcurrant, boysenberry. These wines are light enough in alcohol that you might enjoy them over lunch without (the drinker, rather than the wine) becoming tired.

I was a teenager the last time I'd spent any time in France, when I was *tu* and everyone else *vous*. I had hoped that winemakers would switch into English as soon as formal interviews begin, but only two are conducted in English. Even though I grapple for vocabulary, I leave the dictionary behind. It would only break the flow of conversation. Often, I am lost.

La Chapelle de la Madone stands at the top of the hill, keeping a quiet vigil over the town of Fleurie. Undulating slopes are patched together in different sections of vines, like a quilt made of worn-down fabric. The church is locked, but a sign says it opens for Mass on Sundays. You can see a couple of dozen pews through glass doors. A small monument stands beside the church, each of its four sides depicting the seasons in the vineyards.

Behind it stands Domaine de la Madone. They have just started bottling last year's harvest when I arrive into the cellar. Father and brothers are gathered along the production line. I am mesmerised as the bottles are corked, sealed, labelled and boxed; I could have strayed into *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.



Arnaud Despres takes a break from bottling and takes me upstairs to the tasting room. There is a row of silverware on a sideboard; awards hang on the wall. His father Jean-Marc Despres is the head winemaker; each bottle bears his name. We taste a full flight. The 1889 bears the date of the family's oldest vines. We try *vieilles vignes* (with a much smaller yield which produce a more concentrated wine) under the label *Grille du Midi*.

Arnaud used to sell his own fruit to the co-op in Fleurie until he realised how good it was; he began to vinify it himself. He pours from his own parcel of land, Domaine du Niagre, which he bought at the 2010 harvest. He takes me down to the cellar where his own wine is still in barrel. You can see where his great-grandfather had mined the cellar, blasting it out of the mountain with explosives.

Fleurie, like Julié纳斯 is one of the ten Beaujolais *crus*. Fleurie wines are graceful, feminine, pretty, wines with a soft, gentle floral bouquet: rose, perhaps violet; the palate shows red fruit, raspberry, even cherry. They can be drunk young but can be kept for a few years. I know some people hardly recognize Beaujolais as part of Burgundy, but these are serious wines with some complexity; they complicate my notion of Beaujolais as an area of simple wines.

I stay in Julié纳斯 for a couple of days. Something about the comfort of a hotel means it doesn't quite feel like covering new ground, but I accept any invitations offered, setting out on a treasure hunt of sorts. The hotel owner suggests lesser-known producers, and I show up without appointment. The car is littered with scraps of paper, maps sketched out in pencil like sweet wrappers. I pull into cafes where farm workers eat and leave with maps setting out where to turn at the crossroads. I drive through townlands checking the brass plates on doors. Don't worry when you get to the end of the track, the hotel owner would say, that's the right road.

Alain Coudert and his dog appear as I perform an awkward three point turn in his yard at Clos de la Roilette. The diploma lecturer had talked of how he would much rather drink one of the top Beaujolais *crus* than an entry-level Burgundy. The wines of the Moulin-à-Vent and Morgon crus, he said, show more of the characteristics of

Pinot than Gamay. Jancis Robinson's had written 'Alain Couder's nine hectares of particularly well-sited, east-facing slopes are on the border of Fleurie and Moulin-à-Vent,' and you could see Moulin-à-Vent in the distance, across his vineyard. 'I'm in love,' Jancis had written, 'The Cuvée Tardive is a special bottling of the produce of older Gamay vines, aged in large old oak and designed to be drunk after the principal bottling.' I put mine away, and it didn't disappoint when I drank it years later.

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I venture a little further north into the Mâconnais and begin tasting Chardonnay. As I swerve away from oncoming vehicles, new signs appear. It seems like every few hundred metres you are leaving one wine producing area and entering another. I pass through tiny villages with huge names in the world of wine. Often two village names entwine, producing one appellation: Viré-Clessé and Pouilly-Fuissé. These wines show ripe stone fruits, notes of melon and honey, good acidity and a long finish. Our lecturer had described the terroir of Pouilly-Fuissé as an amphitheatre. He said that since it had been discovered by the USA prices had gone through the roof.

I sit behind tiny tractors with hoses hanging down behind them, the drivers elevated over huge wheels that would straddle the vines; they remind me of spiders.

I am a good way into the journey when I first put my ear to the barrel. The winemaker opens the bung. Can you hear it, he asks, and as clear as anything it sounds like the snap, crackle and pop of Rice Crispies. The sound is malolactic fermentation (malo), the secondary fermentation that takes place in the barrel. I had thought our lecturers had been exaggerating when they said winemakers could hear when malo had started. I think of Rory saying, leave the radio off, you will hear something burning before you can smell it. I am feeling my way into Burgundy.

The winemakers' eyes light up when we get onto the subject of the land, as if they were talking about their grandparents. They speak enthusiastically about each wine's *élevage*, the amount of time spent in oak *barriques*, and they describe individual vintages as if they were their children.

I interview fathers and sons, and sons who'd broken away from their fathers and bought their own land amidst recriminations and litigation. There is a sense of urgency when the winemakers talk about the harvest. I remember the winemaker telling us that he might have thirty chances to show what the land is capable of producing. There is something almost sacred, I think, about the ritual of the seasons and being at the mercy of the elements. The fruit struggles to ripen in most years and even then rain can destroy a crop at harvest. Perhaps this is part of the attraction for Burgundy lovers.

I have been reading Jefford. He says the age of the vines and the 'paw mark' of the wine-grower have their own importance, but it's always the character of the wine itself that dominates. I'm not so sure. Terroir must extend, I feel, to the individual. I ask winemakers about their legacy; do they consider themselves to be an expression of the land? I can tell immediately when I have gone too far, as the smile would slip, the eyes harden, the way a date will turn in a moment, an irreversible change in the atmosphere. I persist, downloading interviews, taking them away like zip locked bags of evidence. I feel as though I am taking DNA samples, and even though I have informed consent, I wonder do the subjects regret the intimacy of the conversation afterwards.

The night before I leave Juliéna, I notice a beautiful cloud formation as I pull the curtains, a wash of dark clouds across the sky, and in the middle a round moon. When I check the calendar, it is a full moon. The shutters have to be closed as a storm is beginning to fling twigs and leaves around the garden. By morning, hailstones have destroyed portions of the vineyards in Volnay, Pommard and the Hill of Corton. These winemakers do not need a wine student arriving on their doorstep. Some producers have virtually all their crops ruined overnight.

The next day I arrive into the southern end of the Côte d'Or. Raymond Blake's *Côte d'Or* describes the area well:

In the simplest layman's terms, the Côte d'Or can be described as a tear in the earth's surface caused by vertical slippage that exposed a multiplicity of different types of limestone from the Jurassic period. In addition, the resultant

gentle slope faces roughly east towards the rising sun, a combination that has proved ideal for the cultivation of the vine.

*Côte d'Or* therefore refers not to gold, but the aspect of the slopes that see the rising sun. I have heard the complicated pattern that resulted called a *mille feuille* of terroir. Someone else had said it was as though a deck of cards had collapsed.

We had talked in the diploma class about land prices in the Côte d'Or leading to the astronomical prices the wines can command on the market. China had discovered Burgundy, the lecturer said, driving prices higher. We heard about the very small holdings in Burgundy, where 6 hectares is the average compared to 90 hectares in Bordeaux.

Burgundy's vineyards tend to be scattered across hilly sites. Even within vineyards, the ownership is fragmented. No one wants to sell land in Burgundy even when there is a change of generations. In Bordeaux, a château is the administrative and figurative centre of the vineyard. If a Médoc château for example, buys land outside its own appellation, that land is still classified as Médoc: the château's status attaches to the land. In Bordeaux, if a winemaker is not happy with the classification, he can apply to have it revised. On the right bank, revisions take place virtually every ten years last century. A different system operates on the left bank, but both are subject to revision; both can be promoted, both can be relegated. In Burgundy there is no scope to extend. The classification is rigid. A *grand cru* site will virtually always be a grand cru site. Location is everything.

I stop at Puligny-Montrachet, which Jefford says produces what many consider the greatest white wine on the planet. I sit in the village square surrounded by elegant hotels, their walls festooned with Michelin stars. I underline key entries in Jefford's book and decide to chance my luck. *Excusez moi de vous déranger*, I say, surprised that the phone had been answered over lunch. I explain that I am a doctoral student with an interest in terroir: would it be possible to drop by? It's out of the question, says the lady, politely and firmly. We accept invited guests only, she says. I get back into the car, chastened, and drive on.

I cross to the other side of the Saone, retreating from the Côte de Beaune. I stop for the evening at Rully, which my diploma notes described as ‘happy hunting ground’, and better value for white Burgundy. Certainly, there is a room available, says the man at the desk, and he leads me up the staircase. It is the sort of family-run hotel you might see in an Irish market town, the sort of place I used to stay when I was defending cases on Circuit. The landings become less elegant as he hauls my case further up. When he opens the bedroom door there is a faint whiff of food, the smell that lingers in the carpet when you view property offered as an executor sale. Excellent, I’ll take it, I say. I take a shower and go back downstairs. The waiter shows me to a table outside. A war memorial sits in the square, leaves are lying around the base.

I read through the menu; dinner will cost more than the night’s accommodation. I pull out my phone in delight every time the waiter arrives bearing another course. I make notes trying to reconstruct the rich creamy mustard sauce over the chicken and the vibrant pinky red of the raspberries that manages somehow not to crush the mille-feuille. I watch the expressions of diners around me every time a new dish arrives and it seems somehow like we are part of some collective celebration. We launch ourselves into the evening, a little dizzy, welcoming each new arrival. At one point the church bell rings out across the square and it reminds me of the Angelus, that moment in the past when the faithful would stop and say a quick mouthful of prayers.

I choose a half bottle of Rully *Grand Cru* 2008. It is pale gold with ripe citrus fruit; it has elegant but not overpowering new oak. You can still taste it after you have set the glass down. It seems odd somehow to compare Chardonnay to Guinness, but I love how old men would take a sip of their pint and say, *there’s aitin’ and drinkin’ in it*. The wine is round and rich and slightly creamy and I’m not sure if it is the richness of the oak, or the result of stirring the lees (the yeast cells) which gave it that rich creaminess. I imagine if you drank this and ate nothing at all you wouldn’t go hungry.

Wine brings dance to my mind for some reason, or perhaps it has nothing to do with reason. Are all the constituents in balance, the wine lecturers would repeat like a

mantra. It occurs to me that the wine is in a state of constant motion. The winemaker's work seems like choreography. Wine will appeal to the romantic as well as the intellectual, it seems to speak to both left and right hemispheres of the brain and perhaps to be sublime it should satisfy both.

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There is a storm gathering when I arrive into Mersault. The birds are hovering overhead, swallows gathering and swooping, as if they know something we don't. The previous week the hail-storm had destroyed a good part of the crops just two miles away; the previous year's harvest, the 2012, had been disappointing too. I spend a while wandering around. I notice the *cabottes*, the little stone houses the vineyard workers used to shelter from the elements.

Outside one of the châteaux a *tonnellier* has set up a stall under an awning. He invites tasters to try assembling a barrel. He points out the locations of the forests on the map, explaining how the provenance of the wood is an essential part of the process. Inside, the pourer points up towards the wide-angled map of the Côte d'Or, identifying the diverse terroirs. Up and down the Côte winemakers point to miniscule portions of this map to explain the benefits their sites enjoy. The *appellations villages* are ballet pump pink, the *premiers crus* deep pink, and the *grands crus* are mapped out in purple.

When I ask how winemakers can protect their crops against hail, the pourer says it is possible to fire a rocket to trigger the hail rather than to wait for it to fall. It sounds like inducing labour. Nobody does it though, she says. It is too expensive, and it brings the hail down on the neighbour's vineyard. She laughs when I suggest it might be an act of war. All day winemakers shake their heads when I ask how much damage has been done.

The Mersaults need to be tasted slowly. They have a richness, a creaminess that is deeply satisfying. The full body again makes me feel as though I am eating as well as drinking the wines. Rory would have declared them a revelation. I observe the others who have come here. We share some common purpose, like art lovers who flock to

Florence. No one drinks too much, but we seem to drink purposefully, even thoughtfully.

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I close the shutters against another storm as I go to bed. When I check out of the hotel the owner thanks me for staying. When we talk about the hail damage, he nods his head, his eyes dropping down towards my books and says, at least it gives the journalists something to write about.

I have been fairly restrained, given the prices, but a few bottles are rattling around the boot of the car. These wines have been bought for ageing, but not all of them will make it. In a week's time I will attend a friend's wedding on the other side of Chalon-sur-Saone, a solicitor I had shared an office with when I worked as a solicitor for the State.

When the host's allocation would run out the evening before the ceremony four of us would commit what my lecturer would have called a crime against wine. When we had opened an '07 Charmes-Chambertin *grand cru* in class, the lecturer said it was infanticide. The higher the appellation, he said, the longer the wine takes to mature. The Pinots, safe in the car boot, would make the journey home, but a couple of the Chardonnays which had years of life ahead of them would be poured into our toothpaste glasses. They weren't even chilled.

After the wedding the bottles would be divided between our cases. Another friend would take most of the bottles as there was no weight restriction on his luggage. There were works taking place in the Métro stations in Paris that summer, so he had to haul the cases up and down stairs. There were no wheels on his largest case. Somewhere between Gare du Nord and Bercy, the handle would come off in his hand.

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A few tourists watch from park benches as the carousel spins around slowly,

fairground music playing. Toddlers, afraid to let go and wave to their parents, keep a tight grip of the horses' reins. The park sits quietly in the middle of Beaune. It is a small town; the 2007 census listed the population at just over 22,000. Beaune sits half way along the Route Nationale 974, the road that runs through the Côte d'Or. Chablis lies to the north east, the Mâconnais, and Beaujolais to the south, but for the purist, the Côte d'Or *is* Burgundy. If you drive north from the ring road you are heading into the Côte de Nuits: Pinot territory.

Winemaking families have lived here for centuries. Hess, the cheesemakers, faces the carousel; old fashioned flat-bottomed baskets hang outside the door. As soon as you step over the worn doorstep, you're standing on reinforced glass peering down into the virtual foundations of the town: the wine cellar.

The counter runs almost the length of the shop, with soft salty creamy cheese, Epoisse, Brillat Savarin, and the big wheels made by the monks at Cîteaux. There are tiny individual parcels with a fresh sprig of rosemary beside the cheese rolled in ash, and the cheese with an imprint of a medieval cross like the pilgrims' cake at the end of the Camino de Santiago. Salts in every colour and flavour are lined against the wall to the right. Further back there are cured meats and terrines, layers of burnt orange of crevettes, vivid green and hot red tomatoes, the long elegant fingers of asparagus set in aspic. There are custom-made picnic baskets lined and fitted with cutlery and china plates. Beaune offers to improve your cellar and your kitchen; it seems to promise another life. Beane suggests you should drink less, but drink better.

On days when it rains, you can hop from shop to shop, sheltering underneath the awnings. Across the green from Hess stands Atheneum, the specialist bookshop, two floors of wine, decanters, maps, books in various languages on cookery, photography and on wine. Every purchase reinforces the sense of connection.

Baskets hang outside shops everywhere, the rigid dark brown shallow baskets the pickers used to use to store the grapes at harvest. We have them in all sizes, you see the full range, says the lady at the Saturday market. Vendors stand behind stalls of photogenic tomatoes the shape of a bunch of grapes, plaits of pink and purple garlic, shallots in various shapes; bread, cheese, every iteration of the potato, row upon



vibrant row of vegetables. You stand, almost humbled, as if you were in an art gallery. Inside the market refrigerators hum, full of rich thick yogurts, sausages, entrails, tripe spread out like lace.

I base myself in Beaune for a couple of days. When I order wine in Bistrot Bourgignon the glass comes out with a little paper circle attached above the base, marked with the wine and the vintage, but I notice that none of the locals bother with them.

What excites the purist is the single vineyard, not the blend of sites, masking the *terroir*. Aspect, site orientation and geology determine which sites are *village* (they are the flatter, poorer draining vineyards on the flat, they may straddle both sides of the Route Nationale). Our lecturer, exaggerating his point so it would stick in our minds had said that you might as well grow rice paddies in some of the waterlogged tracks. It's tart, isn't it? He'd suggested as we tasted a Bourgogne Pinot Noir which had struggled to ripen. Basic Burgundy, he had, said can be almost *acceptable* verging on *poor*, the quality markers just above faulty on our assessment scale. You should always taste basic Burgundy before you buy, he said.

Owners will argue that their *terroir* is virtually *premier cru*, that their vineyards are only metres away, but there is no arguing with geography. *Premier cru* sites (marked on the map in purple) sit higher up the slope. This affords various advantages, stonier soil (with increased drainage), a more favourable elevation: the angle enables the fruit to receive more sunlight (the way you might tilt up a deckchair). The sites mid slope enjoy the highest status: *grand cru*. As well as improved elevation and aspect, they benefit from the natural drainage of cold air down the slope, reducing frost damage. Most of the sites at the top end are *premier cru*, they are more prone to wind exposure; they shelter the band of *grand cru*.

The individual plots are known as *climats* in Burgundy. An application has been made for UNESCO heritage status for the *climats*. There are leaflets set out everywhere in support of the bid. Chablis already has UNESCO status. The *climats* have been subdivided since the Napoleonic code which provided that each child inherit equally on the death of a parent. Some sites are tiny, but the prices make

micro-farming commercially viable. There is every point in growing a single row of vines.

In Atheneum bookshop I leaf through *Les Climats du Vingoble de Bourgogne*, a collection of photography published in support of the bid. I study landscape and macro portraits of the vineyards and viticultural motifs. The preface is written by Aubert de Villaine, of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, perhaps the most revered man in Burgundy. He writes, *Le climat, c'est une culture. Cette culture dans sa diversité et dans son unité que nous voulons faire inscrire sur la liste du Patrimoine mondial*. It is both the diversity and the unique quality of the *climat* that they wish to have recognised. The *climat*, therefore, is both bespoke and universal, the Burgundian winemakers want to trace it, to write it into tradition. French author, Bernard Pivot, writes, *En Bourgogne, quand on parle de climat, on baisse les yeux sur le sol et, si on tend l'oreille, c'est pour entendre prononcer des non magnifiques qui ont traversé et qui relèvent tout autant de la poésie que de la géographie et de la viticulture*. When we talk about *climats*, our eyes fall to the ground; we say the great names that have lasted for centuries, that speak as much about poetry as geography and viticulture.

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The Hill of Corton sits to my left as I drive north from Beaune: enormous, imperious, like a sleeping giant. Gerald Asher's *A Vineyard in My Glass* describes it as a 'magic mountain'. Asher writes:

Though officially in the Côte de Beaune, Corton produces red wines that rival some of the best of the Côte de Nuits. But the hill is aloof from both and seems rather to play the part of a giant hinge buckling together these two halves of the Côte d'Or at the point where the vine-covered slopes of the Côte de Beaune swing back to face the southeast.

The hill had been spoken of in class in reverential terms, as a site that enjoyed some of the most favourable aspects in the world. It benefits from early morning sun through to late evening, giving the vines long daylight hours. What strikes me the first time I

drive past, however, is the dense forest at the top of the hill. For some reason it reminds me of reading medico-legal reports, where the obstetrician would make reference to an incision above the pubic mound.

Asher says:

There could well have been a vineyard on the hill in the time of the Romans...but the real push to viticulture in the region started only with the arrival of the Burgundians fifteen hundred years ago...Monks of the Cistercian order planted vines on Corton as early as 1160.

Asher says:

the bed of limestone running uniformly through the *grands crus* of the Côte de Nuits here dips abruptly below strata of chalky Oxfordian marls, clays, and iron-red oolites deposited nearly 150 million years ago, when much of western Europe was covered by Jurassic seas. The manifold layers were shaken up a few million years later when the Alps erupted not far to the east and have been worked on by wind and water ever since.

He links this to what can be found in the glass, 'The connections between the tannin in a wine and the clay in the vineyard; between a wine's full expressive aroma and the presence of chalk in the soil were forged by these distant events.'

I have an appointment at Ladoix-Serrigny, a little further north, at Domaine Tollot-Beaut & Fils. Everything's fine, I say as Nathalie Tollot rushes out. My bumper has hit the wall outside her office, but she is gracious about it. There was no harm done.

Tollot had spoken to Asher, 'Each Corton *climat* has such an individual character,' she said, 'that when tasting, one is repeatedly confronting the most basic notions of *terroir*.' I ask Tollot how the light works on the hill and she points to the map setting out the *premier* and *grand cru* sites, to the *climats* on the Hill of Corton, pointing out *les plus jolies*. In French it sounds even more magical. Asher had written, 'Nathalie

Tollot said that the characteristics of the vineyard will always come through... no matter who grows the grapes.'

A magnificent oil painting hangs in the bottling room, depicting the procession celebrating the Feast of St. Vincent, that takes place every February, honouring the patron saint of winemakers. Tollot suggests I put on a jacket before we went down to the cellar. The domaine has been in her family for centuries. We pass wine bottles covered with mould as thick as moss. The cellar looks a little like a disused railway station with train tracks on the ground, metal bars to roll the barrels on and off. Is there time for a *degustation*? She asks, lifting bottles from a metal carrier that you used to see milk bottles arrive in. When she pours, I am unsure what I should say, standing in the cellar that had stood on this site before the Revolution.

I am trying to conduct the interviews in French, partly as a courtesy, and partly in the hope that I might be taken more seriously. I am struggling to understand this new terrain, without adding a language barrier. I have questions prepared, but I don't always understand the answers in their entirety (even in English, I would have been challenged). I don't want to keep interrupting the flow of the conversation, so often I hope that the recording will pick up anything I have missed. Just as my fluency is increasing, however, it too will wear off as quickly (it might wear off like an alcohol-induced haze, disappearing into an inaccessible memory bank) so that the interviews will float in some kind of limbo, beyond reach.

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The day before I had left Mersault I had gone out to a classical music concert in the Church in the town square. I had found it odd to see a roster pinned up in the vestibule setting out Saturday evening Mass times. Somehow, the routine of everyday lives felt strange, even the routine of the sacred. I had to keep reminding myself that people lived ordinary lives here. When I had read about the great wine areas of Burgundy I hadn't thought of the ordinary lives people lived here, of Burgundians pushing trollies around supermarkets or having dental work done.

As I press further north along the Côte de Nuits. The terrior keeps changing, the land

below becomes something else. Names flash past the window: Nuits-St-Georges, Vosne-Romanée, Clos Vougeot, and it feels as if they too are mythical rather than real places. Cyclists pass slowly in groups of twos and threes. Names again begin to blend into each other, names you might whisper rather than say out loud. The names themselves seemed to whisper, Les Charmes, Gevrey-Chambertin, Chambolle-Musigny.

Over the next couple of days I would wear a trail up and down the Route Nationale 974. There is a Routiers' café I liked to eat in. The first time I arrived into the bar there were clusters of men with a drink in their hand, as if they were milling around at a cocktail party. *Bonsoir Madame*, a biker said, a skull inked onto his forearm. There were no women, and when I went to the bathroom I had to lift the toilet seat.

Tonight is barbeque night, the owner said. I was offered a table outside. When I followed the scent of smoke to the grill, the man with the tongs insisted that they would serve me; the owner appeared with skewered grilled meat, two red sausages, and a baked potato in tin foil and sour cream. I wasn't entirely sure what it was. That was Mexican flavour, I think it was pork, said the man when I paid at the bar. If I ate cheval, I did it without knowing. This becomes the stretch of road I think of when I think of Burgundy.

I stop at Aloxe-Corton, just north of Beaune. The workers are removing leaves to let the air circulate; they are hoping that some of the crop will survive. I ask if I can take photographs. Sure, they say. They are hoping for the best, hoping that some of the fruit will survive to maturity, hoping that de-leafing will allow the remaining grapes to ripen and prevent rot. The hail has left bunches of grapes which look like rotten teeth. Some of the fruit is healthy, but the other grapes look gnarled and dark, as if they have been burned by the sun. I feel rotten, as though I am taking photographs of their dead. The workers continue up the vines, backsides in the air, cut-off jeans pointed up towards the sun as they lean down to pull off leaves. I need their help, afraid that I might photograph the wrong thing and produce the hail damage shots at home to learn that it is something quite different. This reinforces the feeling that I am a trespasser, even a voyeur. I feel like an American tourist checking in a loud voice if this is Buckingham Palace or the Houses of Parliament. I am not part of this

tradition. Is intention relevant I wondered, thinking of Yeats' words, *tread softly because you tread on my dreams*. These grapes represent the family's future, nurtured for months, years, generations. Take it, I say to myself, knowing that I wouldn't see this again, not this damage, this year, in this place. I take the shot.

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I catch my first glimpse of Domaine Romanée-Conti from a winemaker's jeep. We are approaching the spiritual home of Pinot Noir. Locals were being priced out of the market throughout France, he says. Some of the sites are miniscule. It seemed to be bad form to sell and siblings who weren't involved in wine would rent sites to each other. The winemaker tells me that an aunt had sold her holding in the 1980s when it wasn't worth much; she needed the money. She should have held onto it, she'd be a rich woman now, he says. This is another aunt's site, he says, stopping to show me a few rows. He points out the difference. The vines look wilder somehow, they are grown biodynamically. I was given a bottle once, he says, it was worth €800. What did you do with it? I ask. I drank it, he says, it was amazing.

Vines stretch up the hills, plots shared between neighbours. I think of Frost's *good fences make good neighbours*. Are there disputes, I ask, remembering litigation from my days as an apprentice, arguments over gutters and party walls, and who had the right to prune fruit trees. Winemakers know their own vines, he says. His family once cut a row of a neighbour's *premier cru* by mistake. They asked us for a row of our *grand cru*, he says, it was worth a lot more, but we did it to keep the peace.

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The next day I drive up to Clos Vougeot, the mythical walled vineyard of the monks of Cîteaux. Asher writes:

For two hundred years now, all French troops passing the Clos de Vougeot are obliged by tradition to present arms. In terms both of its form – majestically solid, elegantly severe – and its history, it is symbolic of the two forces that have shaped Burgundy: the region's agricultural wealth and an

intellectual brilliance that in the late Middle Ages radiated throughout all of Europe from the monasteries at Cîteaux and Cluny.

I have been reading Burgundian winemakers' presentations to the annual Pinot Celebration in Queenstown, accessing Burgundian terroir via Otago. I have been reading Jean-Pierre de Smet on the Benedictines and their role in developing the concept of terroir. The Cistercian order was established when the monks of the Benedictine order broke away from the Benedictine monastery at Cluny, in search of a more austere form of worship. They sought to return to the Rule of St. Benedict: prayer, charity, hospitality, work in the fields and the consumption of no more than three glasses of wine at table. The Cistercians founded a monastery at Cîteaux in 1098. De Smet speaks of 'the hedonism of Cluny versus the austerity of Cîteaux'. The Cluny monks wore black habits; the Cistercians wore white.

The Cistercians planted along the Côte d'Or; they built the Château de Vougeot, where they vinified their wines. The Cluny monks planted vineyards nearby: Romanée-Conti, Romanée -St-Vivant and La Tâche. De Smet writes, 'Both orders, Benedictines and Cistercians, tried to find the best locations to grow vines to produce better wines than the competitor.' He says it was the monks who 'discovered this alchemy between a very specific area, the grape variety, the men's work and the drinkers' interest, what we now call the notion of terroir.' I have in my hands an explanation the beginnings of terroir.

De Smet's concept of terroir encompasses both the land itself and those who influence it, both in terms of viticulture and beyond. He expands the notion to include the need for wine for religious purposes, 'They also had a spiritual approach: their belief was, as the world is a gift of God, they had to find the best expression of the soil through the wine, to thank God for this gift. Their quest and search was also to honour God.'

At Clos Vougeot the château sits proud amidst rows of vines. Few of the vineyards in Burgundy are *clos*, enclosed, walled gardens of wine. De Smet says the limits here are exactly as they were in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Clos Vougeot is now a historic monument. I walk through the old buildings, which are now a museum. No wine is

made here now. The Chevaliers du Tastevin gather here for the annual celebration of the flowering of the vine; sports stars, models and politicians attend as well as winemakers. I see Grace Kelly's photograph on the wall. I study a display of antique *tastevins*, the small silver dishes the size of a saucer. They bring to mind the silver salver the altar boy used to hold under your chin when you received communion.

The next day I return, alone, to Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. I take a photo of the vines stretching up into the slopes, like green corduroy worn down, the earth like brown cord under the velvet lines.

I see horse manure, evidence of ploughing. Aubert de Villaine practices biodynamic viticulture; the horse and trap tramp less weight than tractors onto the soil and avoid compressing the roots. A sign asks visitors to respect the sanctity of the land. Japanese tourists crowd around the wall (the domaine is now part owned by Japanese) but no one breaches the wall. There are stone crosses as tall as street lamps bordering the vineyards. I read signs erected centuries ago. These vines are older than me; they will outlive me. Their wines will outlive me.

I have been trying to improve my fluency. I have just finished reading a ridiculous detective novel: *Flagrant délit à la Romanée-Conti*. I make notes in the blank pages at the back. I write, *Pilgrimage. Retreat. Silence. Tractors. Tastevins. Perennial, permanency, phylloxera. Tax. Evolution. Succession, UNESCO, climat. Pilgrims, gawpers, investors, visitors, outsiders.*

Perhaps terroir is a state of mind. An expectation. A memory. A dream. Terroir is about science, about the chemical and biological make-up of the soil and the sub soil, it is about geology. But it goes beyond that; it strays beyond geography into history, and even into philosophy. Families have farmed this land for generations, for centuries in some cases.

The land and the wine carry with them obvious religious undertones, the symbolism of communion. I need some time to think about what I have seen. I want to see what remains of these monastic traditions. I leave the car radio off as I make my way towards the silence of Cîteaux.



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The *Frère Hotelier* says I am quite welcome to join them. They insist on a number of things: guests are to stay for a minimum of forty-eight hours; they must observe silence and attend at least two services a day. I won't be able to stay the full forty-eight hours, I explain, negotiating my terms of confinement. I am really negotiating, of course, with myself.

He takes me into the kitchen, a large, clean, bright industrial space. He points to a blackboard with a row of columns, a figure in chalk indicating the number of people expected for each meal. You check how many people are coming and set the table, he says. On the first day, you follow the others, he says, the second day you help, and by the third day you will be giving directions.

The first dinner is difficult. The silence feels oppressive and I have an urge to burst into laughter. We stare as a fly lands on the table and takes off. The man next to me waves his hand, shooing it away. A man across the way smiles apologetically; he smells of cigarettes; his hands are shaking. I wonder what he has left behind. Two men in their late forties sit together, smile lines around their eyes; they look like brothers. The fly man breaks the silence. *C'est vraiment pénible*, he says, when the fly lands in the bread basket. We stare, transfixed. A few minutes later, he takes his napkin and knocks the fly against the table. The fly turns upside down, kicks its legs in the air, flips over and takes off. After we have finished eating we fold our napkins and put them in separate numbered compartments under a sign that says breakfast will be served from 3.40 a.m. to 8.30 a.m.

The kitchen is silent. Plates appear at the sink to be washed, rinsed and reached across to the drying board. We swoop, drying cloths in our hands. Someone opens the other end of the cupboard from the dining room and sets the table for breakfast the next morning.

The monks rise for prayer at 4am, then spend the time at study before service at

7.30 a.m. The rest of the day is spent at prayer, study and work, the day ending after the 8 p.m. service. They never take holidays, never retire. The bell rings for ten minutes at the beginning of each service, calling the monks to prayer, and they appear one by one, returning from duties on the farm. The bell rings again and they bend forward, like courtiers in a formal overture. The service is a series of bows and sung refrains; it is gentle and soft; you glide through it, and afterwards you glide out of the church.

I pass two monks dressed entirely in white as I wander around the grounds; they are lifting the top off beehives to harvest honey. They look as if they have landed on the moon, the sound cut in transmission.

I will remember these days as like a dream. When I see the monastery in my mind, I will see it surrounded by the forest at Cîteaux, the faint hum of traffic in the background. I will see the monks bowing and singing; I will see a constant stream of pilgrims; the silent choreography of the kitchen, arranging a cycle of plates from the table to the kitchen and back to the table, saying grace, passing the wine. I will hear the soft chants rising and swirling up through the church. It will merge into an aerial photography scene from an invisible vantage point; the plates mid-air, almost invisible, the pilgrims like whirling dervishes, the footage slowed down; the monks bowing in a never-ending dance.

## Chapter 7

### On London Bridge

I came to London to study wine, to write about where it finds its roots. The wine exams taken by students across the world are set here, at the Wine and Spirit Education Trust, across the road. Winemakers gather in London for trade tastings from across the globe. As I focus on terroir, I become fascinated by the terroir of this land, the *placeness* of this place.

The night I move in, the echoes of footsteps in the empty apartment mirror the hollow sounds that ricocheted around my own place in Dublin before the tenant moved in. I love the sense of being in transit, of being in both places yet still being in neither.

I spend a lot of time on this street, slightly guilty about wasting my travel pass. It feels like living in a village. The night I arrived I collected my keys from the corner shop. On a wet day the estate agent says, drop in. We have new umbrellas, stop by and take one. I notice how people stick to their own territory, like life before the bicycle was invented.

I love the dance between the city's reserve and its immediate intimacy, how strangers ask if they can lift your suitcases as you struggle up the steps at the Tube station. In the mornings I pass teachers and staff on their way to the wine school. I want to say hello, but sometimes they would rather not make eye contact, as though I might disturb a moment of privacy.

I come to love that sense of restraint, how Radio 4 presenters interview guests without talking over them, how nobody jumps the queue. It's as though there's an invisible barricade straining to hold everything in place. I imagine if one person raised their voice, chaos might break out. It feels like good manners are papered over a fault line.

In class, an Australian Master of Wine gives us a walkabout through his country. He talks about how things were since the *white fullas* moved in, and how the locals would ask where your father was from, where you went to school, or how much you earned depending on whether you're in Melbourne, Sydney or Brisbane. He lifts his glass and says, that's a bloody good wine. He stares at the whiteboard, and says, I'm not sure what this slide is supposed to mean, until someone points out that it is the outline of Australia superimposed onto a map of Europe.

I love how London is made up of layers, different versions of the same city. TfL (Transport for London) asks if you wish to travel by Tube, bus or boat; it maps out your route, and gives an estimated time of arrival. When I meet a school friend in the George pub off Borough High Street a sign suggests Shakespeare may have drunk here.

I love how you think in terms of the Tube line you are on rather than a topographical map. A friend writes reviews for *Time Out* and we set out for newly opened restaurants. We make our way from underground stations, our faces illuminated by Google maps. She usually orders, to get a sense of the chef's range. One night, cutting through sweetbread, I realise I wouldn't be able to locate it on an anatomy chart and I wonder if I am eating the animal's soul.

I have sold my car, so I never feel the steering wheel pull into a camber in the road or work out how to negotiate the one-way systems. I can't bring myself to cycle: there are deaths on the road every week. I don't quite have the feel of the land: the dips and inclines you only notice when you cycle.

I start to notice tasting tables in the basements along my street: wine merchants and bakers and a barristers' chambers. José tapas restaurant offers wonderful Spanish wines and sherries; I grow fluent in its list. I am afraid I might develop Type II diabetes like Robert Parker. I take up running; an app traces the route past the gastropub and the French bistro, the Italian restaurant before the bakery and the one beyond it and down to the park where I run circuits. The app stores images of the route, as though someone has tried to outline a map but the pencil has slipped over the edges.

I pass a stream of wine students on their way to London Bridge station. You can tell what level they are studying depending on how many cardboard boxes of tasting glasses they are carrying. On the Tube I watch a woman highlighting her wine textbook; the notes are written in Asian characters.

As I read about soil and rocks and root depths, I am mesmerised by the Underground. Nobody talks, as if it's some sort of secret place, the rules of etiquette suspended temporarily. I love how people stare into silence as though we're sitting in a doctor's waiting room. The Tube stops, then lurches forward. A young girl says, Daddy, we're going sideways.

It's some sort of other universe down here – students are leaning over homework, actors learning their lines. I love how you can read the paper over your neighbour's shoulder without the ink coming off on your hands. In winter I take off my coat; it feels as though I live down here.

Sometimes I sit in the library in the basement of the school, surrounded by shelves of accumulated wisdom, textbooks and tasting notes. I watch as the cellar is unlocked and the bottles from the day's tasting list are loaded onto a trolley and the door is locked again like the medicine chest.

The school is always busy, but the teachers speak to every member of staff by name. The computers in the library have been donated by Jancis Robinson, MW. I see framed viticultural maps donated to the school by Michael Broadbent, one of the first Masters of Wine in the UK.

The relationship with place changes when it's someone else's suitcase and not yours being hauled over the cobbles beneath your window. I think of James Goldsmith saying when you marry your mistress you create a job vacancy. Home becomes the place I go on holiday.

The school keep writing to my Irish address. Exam results are posted out over bank holiday weekends and I pace up and down past their locked door. I am the closest on the planet to the wine school and almost the last to receive my results.

## Chapter 8

### Diploma

When I first moved to London the crash of glass would waken me early in the morning as lorries collected bottles outside bars and restaurants. Sometimes sportscars would race past, their exhausts echoing off the walls of the buildings. I thought of the topography of street, the buildings became valley walls like those of the great wine regions, the Rhône, the Marne and the Douro.

In class we look at images of UNSECO heritage terraces on the steep banks of the Douro, at the stones with no vegetation but vines, where they needed explosives to penetrate the land. We watch footage of winemakers dancing in the *lagares*, crushing the grapes, to extract the tannins in the thick black skins of the fruit. Dancing, up to their knees in macerated grapes and juice, pips and skins on their shins, working out and softening the tannins. We watch footage of how the wines used to sail up the Douro, to age in the cooler coastal areas to prevent them turning into jam. We watch footage of wines loaded into the hulls of ships bound for the docks along the Thames.

Studying for the fortified wine exam, I watch a winemaker tobogganing down the steep streets of Madeira on YouTube. In class we hear about Madeira wines which effectively cooked under the rafters of the warehouses, or in the hold of ships, and how fortification protected the wine for travel.

In fortified wine class, Karen tells us about the sherry triangle in Alicante in south west Spain, made up of Jerez de la Frontera, Sanlúcar de Barrameda and El Puerto de Santa María. Sherry is one of the revelations of the Diploma; it stretches from bone dry fino, moving up in flavour (and alcohol) to Amontillado, to Oloroso, to Palo Cortado, to PX, described as ‘raisin gravy’. We hear how the dry manzanillas (the bone dry finos from Sanlúcar) benefit from the cooling salty breezes coming in off the Atlantic. The wines are aged in butts under a layer of flor (dead yeast cells, that

look like loft insulation) where they could spend decades in airy warehouses, not underground cellars.

The *palomino* grape is not a terroir grape; Sherry is not a terroir wine. It develops its sherry aromas during the maturation process, after vinification and fortification.

The storage system (the solera) is part of the complicated process where barrels are stacked up going from old to new so that no two wines are identical. Sherry is the ultimate blend, yet each wine is unique, siphoned off from a number of different barrels. The solera strikes me as a form of genius. I imagine the wines, barrel stacked on top of barrel, standing on the shoulders of giants.

In London Bridge I watch crates arriving in the morning, I watch the waiters set up for service in José, I watch the day unfold; at the end of service the chefs, washing down the kitchen, standing on benches, reaching up into the belly of the fans. In Southern Spain, the sherry bodegas themselves, the warehouses, are tall and airy; they are described to us as cathedrals.

I become aware that I view wine the way the Romantic poets regarded nature. To me wine provides the same release that hikers or birdwatchers enjoy, except that I can engage with nature without leaving the city.

\*

In *Casse Croûte* on the corner of the street, I watch bubbles rise from the bottom of the champagne saucer. I imagine invisible divers circling the bottom of the glass, the bubbles rising up from their oxygen tanks.

In class, we learn how to assess the bubbles (the mousse) which might be delicate, creamy or aggressive. We assess the size of the bubbles and whether they formed in tank (like Prosecco) or as a result of the secondary bottle fermentation (in Cava and Champagne). We taste the creamy, brioche qualities from the lees stirring and how extended lees ageing lends a richness to the wine. We learn that in Franciacorta in Italy, the minimum period on lees is longer than in Champagne. We assess New



World sparkling wines. We learn what characteristics the varieties bring to the wine: how Pinot Noir adds muscle or backbone, and how Chardonnay brings softness, citrus, lemon curd and sometimes preserved lemon. We learn about champagne's English heritage, *La Méthode Anglaise*.

A Master of Wine who specialises in sparkling wine points out spikes in graphs marking economic patterns. Champagne, she says, is the canary in the mine: dips in sales mean an economic crash. Not just wine, but the sale of wine it seems has particular knowledge, the ability to read the future.

\*

Any views on how long this wine will age? asks Gregory, our lecturer on Southern France. Gregory had climbed into an old Morgan with a few friends after graduating Oxford in the late '60s and driven to the Southern Rhône, he says, when wine was still affordable. Five years I'm offered, any advance on five years? he asks, like an auctioneer about to lower the hammer.

Gregory repeats the question through the day. Drink it now, says one of the students at our table, don't even put the bottle sideways. Gregory takes another sip; funnily enough, I think it has a future, he says.

\*

We sit under the mural of one of the Livery Companies in the City, the Worshipful Company of Distillers. Our spirits teacher, Michael, sounds like Rick Stein. He talks about the palates of the great blenders of Scotch and how coopers choose the tree that would receive the whiskey before it is felled, so as not to dry out the wood.

Michael says any spirit starts its life as a clear liquid and absorbs the colour over time: amber into mahogany brown from barrel maturation. He talks about how closely the gin companies guard their recipes and how London Dry Gin is defined by the process and not geographically, how it doesn't need to be distilled in London.

Michael counts the seconds as we hold the spirits in our mouths to judge the length: One second, per year. Michael Broadbent tastes with an egg timer, he says. Refresh your palates and charge your glasses, he tells us.

We taste tequila first thing in the morning and everyone in the class makes the face a baby makes when he tastes lemon juice. I think of tequila when I worry how to distinguish one neat spirit from another under exam conditions. Some of the peaty whiskeys remind me of trying to smoke as a teenager, the aftertaste of stale coffee and cigarettes. Sometimes I think of the taste as a shock, how it wears off leaving a sense of relief.

When the trolley is wheeled into class it never looks just like a tray of drinks. I'm sure the bottles are counted out and counted back in like surgical instruments

We taste, observed by distillers depicted beside their pot stills on murals. Michael explains the workings of the continuous pot still. He shows us the swan's neck, explains the double and triple distillation process. He says you could lose your sight or your life if the process of distillation goes wrong. *Never* try this at home, he says.

At the end of class, we rinse out our mouths; we lift plastic cups like patients in the dentist's chair. Some days it seems as though we might spit out our teeth into the sinks like sluices. Some days those sluices remind me of abattoirs; when red wine swirls towards the plug I think of animals bleeding out.

\*

We sit in classrooms beneath murals of the Worshipful Company of Vintners, willing us to succeed. We talk about vineyard pests and diseases, about earthquakes and drought and hail. We hear how vineyards survived floods and pestilence. We learn how the Duero region in Spain had woken up to quality potential. We learn about the experimental irrigation conducted by the Marques de Griñon under the advice of Dick Smart, the Australian viticulturist who changed the landscape of the drought ridden area. We hear about the infertile granite in Galicia, the inhospitable ground similar to Beaujolais, as though the grapes were patients at a fertility clinic.

We learn how phylloxera infested vineyards across Europe, effectively exterminating everything in its wake until scientists realised that American rootstock was phylloxera-resistant. Gradually, winemakers began to graft European plants onto American rootstock. We learn that the lack of investment in Spain, paradoxically, paid dividends, such as the dormant vines, the old vines rooted deep in *licorella* soils, on the steep terraces of Priorat in Catalunya that had been abandoned after phylloxera to be discovered a hundred years later like *Sleeping Beauty*.

This is the winemaker's one chance, the MW says in a class on young vineyards in Bordeaux. Is he going to grub the whole lot up and start again, or simply graft over what is there? I am struggling to visualise what happens. Apparently, it is like fitting dentures over existing roots rather than extracting the lot and drilling implants into the bone.

We learn how vines can go dormant when challenged by extreme temperatures. We learn how a diurnal variation of light and heat can fix colour and perfumes and acidity and these wines tended to be more aromatic and show luminosity.

We talk about Phylloxera in California; Gareth reads from Robert Louis Stephenson's *The Ebb Tide*. Gareth talks about how vineyards had survived Prohibition; how grape juice had been stacked alongside brewer's yeast and sugar, as it is in supermarket shelves in Saudi Arabia.

We learn about joint ventures between the Old and New World. We learn about French soul on Oregon soil.

On Bordeaux day I hear balsa wood listed as a descriptor. I remember reading a cartoon where Dilbert is imagining how security guards make the most of their time to consider the great questions of our time, as a thought bubble hanging over guard's head, asking *I wonder what balsa wood tastes like?* I wonder if this is what my life has come to.

\*

In school, the trollies are re-loaded and removed by a man like a hospital porter. When the wines are poured into carafes to taste blind, they remind me of urine samples of patients at various degrees of dehydration.

As we taste, I feel sure this is about more than fuel, more than thirst.

The subject doesn't come naturally to me. I can't read the equations or understand how they balance each other out, so I learn them off by heart. I memorise the equation for fermentation, the chemical process which produces alcohol as a by-product; the accident of wine.

I begin racing past the wine school in yoga gear to the Bikram Yoga studio. I pass engineers, men who work with cameras that take no photos, noting measurements I don't understand. They move the tripod and spray markings on the road that mean nothing to me.

We talk about the importation of clones and cuttings, about nurseries and quarantine. We talk about gene mutation and genetic engineering and resistance to vineyard pests. We learn where grapes are grown and why, according to climate and topography. We learn which are late ripeners, which are early developers.

We talk about precision viticulture enabling winemakers to detect vine stress by infrared. We talk about grape-picking robots. We learn about quarantine, about vines sharing genetic information but not DNA. We hear about the parentage of grape varieties. It sounds like the grapes might carry Kennel Club pedigree papers or passports like animals intended for export.

We hear of European countries as though they were the homeland. These conversations take place just hundreds of metres from Immigration control, where Home Office vans with caged windows and insistent beeps reverse out from a yard where barbed wire cleaves onto the fence, and the yard abuts an allotment with a sign that reads *Laying Down Roots*.

## Chapter 9

### Exams

Hugh Johnson, MW, once said that fifty years in the wine trade were worth one look at the label.

When you taste under exam conditions it is so easy to dismiss your initial reaction, your instinct will have been correct, the senses have their own memory, which logic seems to confuse. It is easy to lose your way.

When we drink, memory merges with taste. When I smell Pinot with evidence of development there is a hard-to-define smell that reminds me of my grandmother's farm. Karen, our lecturer, insists our notes must be objective; we are not to write tasting notes describing the wine like the inside of our granny's handbag.

Let's not write too many adjectives down, says Karen. We group senses in clusters, showing we can appreciate the nuances in the wine. Is it generic? Could it have been made anywhere? Before we establish the nationality of the grape, we need first to decide if it is worth the effort. Could it come from anywhere? If so, say it's a simple wine. *Simple* is a descriptor, she says. *Please*, she says, no food pairing suggestions.

We are preparing for the final exam, which covers the still wines of the world. There is a three-hour written paper, and a separate blind tasting exam. This exam constitutes 50% of the overall Diploma marks and has the highest failure rate of all the papers.

Before you lift the glass, you should have a fair idea of what developmental stage this wine is at. The colour should help. Is it youthful: primary fruit and floral aromas? Is it developing? Is there evidence of oak integration? Is it fully developed? An aged Rioja will become lighter with the years, the American oak adding body and sweet spice, vanilla and coconut.

Once you taste the wine you'll have an idea of sweetness levels. Most reds are dry. Whites range from bone dry, such as Chablis, to Tokaji which is unctuous.

Are the fruits red or black, fresh or cooked? Do you detect any oak? Is it old or new, French or American? The primary aromas will be fruit, possibly flowers: white blossom, orange blossom, rose, violets. Secondary aromas would include oak and tertiary begins to describe the development of the wine. This is where the interest lies, the complexity. Is there any age? Have any vegetal, any mushroom, or meat or savoury aromas developed? Much of the language is French: *viande*, *saigné*, *garrigue*, the dried herb note you might tramp underfoot in the hills of Southern France.

Assess the acidity: is your mouth watering? How much? Then the tannins, are they grippy or firm, chalky or ripe? Are they soft or harsh, do you feel them grip your gums, like cold tea might feel astringent?

How is the alcohol? Is there heat after you spit the wine? Is the body light, medium or full? It is mouth filling, round, creamy? Is there a honey note, or does it feel like the consistency of water? What about flavour intensity, flavour characteristics? Perhaps most important in terms of how the wine will be judged is, how is the length? Do the flavours linger in your mouth after the wine is gone (long finish) or is it over as soon as it's left your mouth?

A complex wine will have structure, the components will be in balance; no one feature will dominate. The acidity will balance out the high tannin, such as a good Chianti Classico. A high alcohol Barolo will have high acidity keeping the structure in balance.

Do you detect leather, sweet cedar, tobacco leaf? Is there honey, marmalade, candied peel? Keep smelling. But don't overdo it; don't let your mind take over. Sense what is actually there, not what you think should be there. You may become clouded, a witness trying to identify a suspect from an identity parade. I don't know, you begin to say, maybe it's none of them, I can't remember.

It's a *medium* sort of wine really, isn't it, says Gareth, as he walks the class through a tasting. Get off the fence, Karen says, we don't want to read answers suffering from mediumitis.

We learn about how grapes adapt to their climate. The Italian day is introduced as a homage to tannin. Sometimes it is hard to take the lecturer seriously when he is speaking through black teeth. The trollies are wheeled in and wheeled out again. All the while we keep spitting out, pouring the spittoons into the silver sluice sinks, refreshing our palates like dental patients with plastic cups. After the long day's tasting I am afraid we might spit out our fillings.

As we taste, Gareth reminds us that if the wine is too young it's not the wine's fault, and we must not penalise it on quality assessment, it's our fault for drinking it too early. We hear that wines are too young or too old, how it would be interesting to revisit them in five years' time. I think of time travel.

We learn how to calibrate our palates, to taste what you are tasting, so sing from the examiner's hymn sheet. We talk about wines ageing as though we are weather forecasters, as though we are the Oracle at Delphi.

\*

The writing lump I got on my finger during my A Levels has returned.

When I interviewed Steve Smith, MW, winemaker in Hawkes Bay a while back, he said he sat a practice paper every day until he took his final Master of Wine exams. I take up residence at the corner office outside, mimicking exam conditions, writing as fast as my hand will allow for the time allocated to each question.

I watch another student transcribing his notes with a Smart Pen, they upload directly onto his computer. It would be useful, I think never to have notes disappear. The floor of my flat is carpeted with regions from Europe to the New World. Regions advance and retreat; entire countries are read, marked up and returned to the floor.

Germany is subsumed and lost, like Czechoslovakia in World War II, but re-emerges after the exams.

\*

As the exams approach, we begin to exhibit psychosomatic symptoms, to imagine the stirrings of chest infections, terrified that we will smell (and therefore taste) nothing.

The tasting glasses I ordered online haven't arrived. I cross to the school to buy another box. I bring them home and give them a good wash. They smell of cardboard.

The soap dispenser at the examination centre leaves a confectioned blue flower scent on the skin. I can't get it off; I scrub my hands frantically, like Lady Macbeth.

Hundreds of candidates abandon bags of notes and file into the exam hall. Some of the students have taken long haul flights, the South American students look jet lagged as well as nervous. The desks are small, with just about enough room for the script, writing paper and six glasses and spittoon.

Read the question.

I mark the wine glasses and begin to mark up my observations. Half-way through the first flight of three I lose my concentration. I'm not sure if I've written the right number on the right glasses. I pour them out and call back the invigilator. I repour and start again.

From the minute I lift the first glass to my nose I know these are Pinot Noir, but the more I write the less sure I become. They seem much too tannic for Pinot; perhaps they are from a warmer climate. I interrupt my strict time plan to write down what they couldn't be. I lose my nerve. I don't know where they are from. I begin to panic.



Most of my individual observations are probably right, but I run out of time and write Syrah, as they seem alcoholic and ripe; they seem to come from a hot climate.

I move onto the second flight where the wines have a common theme. I read country instead of region so although I have correctly identified Sancerre and Vouvray I mistake the light-bodied red for a Beaujolais, and instead of Loire I write France. I am marking university scripts this year, so I am both writing this paper and marking it in my mind. I imagine the examiner losing patience.

After lunch I scrub my hands again, not that the perfumed soap will matter in the written paper. It is possible, in fact common, to pass one and fail the other, so this is a clean start. I line up my watch, a collection of pens and a water glass. I map out my essay plans, spreading my things across the desk to my left that was set out for a student who never arrived. When I move onto the next essay question, the desk beside me is clear. I think I have lost my essay plan. The draft takes on a nostalgic hue; if I re-draft I won't capture everything. I sift through my own pages. It's here.

After three strong essay questions, I come undone. I need to write two more essays. I can write something on another three of the questions, but not enough. I start three separate essays, but if I was marking this paper, I wouldn't be convinced. I can hear Gareth's warning about time management, his warning about the student who wrote a prize-worthy question to fail the rest of the paper. The whatever-you-do-don't-do-this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As if struck down with heat exhaustion, people begin to leave the room. I want to reach out to the man who leaves with half an hour to go, to remonstrate with him. Surely there must be something more he can write. It's not the unknown unknowns, Gareth had said to us, it's the unknown knowns. You know more than you think. You need to find a way to access the knowledge you have in the exam, he said. As more students get up, I just want them gone, quickly. Could you be a bit quieter, I want to say, feeling ashamed, wondering will they be here again in November. No matter what they write in the re-sit, their mark will be capped at a pass.

Five minutes, says the examiner, and I gather the pages together, checking that I have filled in my examination number, making sure each page is numbered, that my answers match the order the questions appeared on the exam paper.

I turn over the exam script. I have missed a question. I have failed.

I count the pages; I count five essays, the exam requirement. I don't have time to assess whether I could have answered it or not. I have been sitting exams for a third of a century; this might be my worst yet. I get a perverse pleasure from the idea that I may have passed despite myself.

The invigilator stands over me. I am the last to submit as I scribble my student number at the top of each page. That too, she says, pointing to the exam script. I can hardly get it into the envelope, hands shaking. I see for the first time the warning (set out in capital letters) which reads, FAILURE TO RETURN THIS PAPER WILL RESULT IN IMMEDIATE DISQUALIFICATION.

St Paul's bells toll in the background as we stand outside a pub in the city drinking rounds of gin and tonic. No one wants to drink wine.

The next morning the courier rings my doorbell. The tasting glasses have arrived.

\*

It feels strange to have unstructured time stretch out ahead.

If I am out in the early hours, I see the same fox, confident, never furtive. He has the street to himself as he passes the wine school, his legs rising and dropping like a dressage pony.

Exam notes are lifted off the floor, quickly replaced by different sheaves of paper stretching through the flat.

The results come through. I have passed.

\*

It feels decadent to drink champagne at lunch. You've become a dog, my sister says, as I lift the glass to the nose instinctively. She's been reading how dogs perceive the world, how they find their bearings. I look out across London from the thirty-third floor of the Shard. I can see Canary Wharf just beyond the bend in the river. The train tracks look much wider, like a motorway stretching out from London Bridge. The flat terrain surprises me, the bends in the river are so much more pronounced as the Thames almost doubles back on itself. I can make out the back of my apartment. I spot the WSET wine school. Inside they'll be preparing for the sparkling wine exams we sat in the spring.

The diploma graduation is to take place tonight at the Guildhall. Tonight, waves of graduates will file past. I will be fascinated by the Kimono worn by one of the students, like a little backpack. I will wonder what she has in it. It's like a picnic rug in silk, folded up or a parachute, waiting for her to pull the escape valve. *What Colour is my Parachute*, it was called, the career book my work roommate lent me over a decade ago.

Ian Harris, CEO of the school, will read a short biography of each student as they receive their diploma. Student after student will cite a snap decision to leave a job in the City. The man beside me will ask, where are the people who are dying to get out of wine, and into law? None of this will matter as the teachers pose beside us for photographs, as we all reach out to trays of champagne.

Across the way on Bermondsey Street right now, someone will be wheeling the hostess trolley into the classroom to start the afternoon class. The students will hear the clank of the bottles, unmarked samples labelled by number. Later in the day the tasting trolley will be wheeled in as though someone has ordered room service.

Outside on the street, cardboard boxes will gather, bunched and tied together, awaiting collection. Later into the night, a fox will pause as he passes the school. He will press his nose into the bundle. He will smell nothing but cardboard.

## Chapter 10

### Footstepping *le Maître*

We are almost in Beaune when the train pulls to a halt. I am on my way to meet Alan Brady, Godfather of the Gibbston. The train in front of us has gone on fire. I can see cars driving over a bridge nearby, but we are to remain on the train. I text apologies to Alan. No rush, he says. An announcement plays on a loop, asking us not to open the doors; passengers join the conductor who is hanging out the door, smoking. The emergency services look on from the road. I count over a dozen gathered in groups; they keep multiplying.

I have a few bottles in my case (coals to Newcastle). Alan had mentioned that we might do a little Burgundy/ Otago comparative tasting, so I had lifted out the last of my New Zealand offerings, an '07 Felton Road which had been carried back from Otago in early '09 and was making its way towards Burgundy where it would complete its journey.

We are due to meet for dinner. I text renewed apologies. It's getting warm in this carriage. It's not looking good for the wine, I say. Unsure of how the 'bastards expelled from the Big House of Burgundy' might be received, Alan texts back, don't open the Felton Road, there'll be a riot.

\*

I meet Alan and his partner Rosie, and a few of his friends in Le Bistrot Bourgignon. Alan is a Northern Ireland Protestant; he left for New Zealand decades ago. I can't believe I'm surrounded by four Catholics on this trip, he says, laughing. I have rejected all that, he says.

Terroir takes me back to law, which has a preoccupation with where you stay, where your assets are, what you intend to leave behind. Residence is determined by the

number of days you are present in the country over a year. Domicile however is a matter of intention as well as time. It is concerned with where you consider ‘home’, where you intend to return to die, where you intend to be buried. Terroir has come to represent invisible geography, religion, and history. It is archaeology and genealogy. I see invisible borders when I think of terroir. Where place begins and where it ends.

Over dinner I say I am exploring terroir as an expression of identity. I ask Alan where he intends to be buried. If you had six weeks to live, I ask him, would you go back to Ireland? What I really mean is, where do you want to die? One of the party says, in six weeks he’d have time to go and come back.

A platter of beef carpaccio arrives, sliced so finely it looked like slides cut for histology. I still haven’t got to grips with Burgundy, I tell Alan. I haven’t tasted enough to build up a palate memory. You need to be patient, we were told when we tasted a particularly young *grand cru* in class. What you are buying here, said Gareth, is €90 worth of tannin. To fully appreciate the nuances of Burgundy would require a palate which doesn’t second guess itself, and an unlimited budget.

Asian and markets are losing confidence in Bordeaux; recent vintages haven’t justified the prices set after the *en primeur* tastings. Investors are turning their attention to Burgundy. The market here is fixed by the charity auction which takes place in the third week of November at the Hospices de Beaune, the old hospital established for the poor.

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Pinot is a grape grown on the margins. At 45 degrees south they are on the edge of what is feasible; Burgundy lies at the northern limit. Often the grapes in Burgundy struggle to ripen; they are famously susceptible to frost and hail. Pinot is thin-skinned, it is prone to rot and disease; it has a frailty. Pinot is mystical in part because of this vulnerability.

The bid for UNESCO status for the *climats* is still live. The Otago winegrowers lodged papers in support of Burgundy’s application. An exchange programme has

been established; stagiaires are sent from north to south and south to north. Young Burgundian winemakers learn from the New World, the Otago students learn the traditions of the Old. The godfather of Pinot worldwide, Aubert de Villaine of Domaine Romanée-Conti addressed the Pinot Celebrations in Queenstown last year.

I am still confused by the concept of the *climats*. I wonder doesn't land the world over have its own geographical features. I think about the tiny parcels of land, the individual rows, which are not demarcated one from the next. One grower may have certified organic status, his neighbour might be biodynamic, the one next to that may use pesticides. Other than a ban on spraying on windy days, it seems they must share the space. Studying for my final WSET exams, I came across a report of a biodynamic producer who was fined by the courts for refusing to spray for vineyard pests.

The landscape appears smaller than I remember it. Even the Hill of Corton seems so much smaller, the way buildings from your childhood do, so that we're almost past it before I recognise it. As we make our way north from Beaune we pass an industrial plant, Pierre de Bourgogne. I remember thinking how strange it was to see stone itself being quarried in the midst of these vineyards, the land itself being harvested.

I am standing in the spiritual home of Pinot with Alan Brady, the man who first let me taste from the barrel. I am footstepping the master through the vines, a passenger on somebody else's pilgrimage.

\*

I watch Alan taste, tipping the wine at the bottom of his glass back into the barrel, a mark of respect to the winemaker. This wine has been in barrel for upwards of a year. The winemaker dips what looks like a long proboscis into the barrel and when he draws it out, it looks as though he has drawn blood.

Everything you put across your palate should be a learning experience, an MW student once told me. I'm trying to get everything down on the tasting sheets. I'm

balancing a tasting glass, smiling, nodding. I'm interpreting for the group this afternoon, yes we'd like to taste the next one.

Alan will comment on the structure of the wine, how the components fit together. Does the alcohol interfere with the balance? Does it dominate the wine? Here the younger wines, the '12s will not have been in bottle long. While the oak doesn't yell from the glass it still needs to settle, it will become one of the components giving it structure to last on its evolution. There is an element of clairvoyancy: how will it taste in fifteen, even fifty years' time? It seems almost as if it is being prepared for the afterlife.

I can't photograph and record an interview at the same time. My notes are a fusion of Alan's observations and the winemaker's comments, a mixture of French and English. Sometimes it seems easier to transcribe what is said rather than waste time trying to translate. I will try to write my own observations. I hope the recorder will pick up what I don't have time to write down, but it won't pick up the nodding, the raised eyebrows. I will be left with the sound of slurps and spits and footsteps on the cellar floor.

It's easier being a passenger on someone else's journey. The tastings are planned ahead of time, you sit in the back seat, watching the tractors chug their way slowly along the roads. Alan points out the canopy management systems in place in the vineyards, noting the height of the vines.

It is a sort of privilege to stand in the vineyard with the grower, to be invited into the cellar to taste from the barrel. I want to avoid the tasting becoming a series of ticks. I wonder what I can write that the reader won't already know. I can't write shorthand so I don't have time to preface sentences, the winemaker thinks, as opposed to, this is what I tasted in the glass. I wonder how to make honest notes when the winemaker is talking to you. I find it hard to smile while my note is critical; I would be a poor poker player.

Tasting makes me think of speed dating. Would you see this person again? I might have questions about the harvest that year or the vinification process. But what I

struggle with is the code you write while continuing the conversation, a code which will be accessible to you, but not the winemaker. Would you like to see this wine again?

Having shared a bedroom with my sister growing up, I am used to writing in coded references, but when I look back at my diary, I wonder who said, never mention this again, or what it was that was never to be mentioned. I still haven't negotiated how to communicate with myself, the person who will have to make sense of these tasting notes. I haven't yet devised a shorthand to avoid offence, so the coded messages will remain a mystery, the comments are so guarded that I cannot even unpick them myself.

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The name of the cooper is stamped on each barrel. The winemakers answer questions about oak, how long the wine has been in barrel, how long the barrels are used (they impart no flavours after three years and become inert storage vessels). Alan asks about clonal selection, the decision to use specific clones or a mixture, known as selection massale, allowing nature to decide which clones 'take'. When it gets down to the vines they will give an average age without hesitation, point out the various parcels on the map, indicate the age of the plantings. They answer questions, but I wonder if they are holding back. Someone says, *c'est le terroir*, when asked about clones. We have old vines, the winemaker says. We have a native French speaker with us this afternoon. She presses the winemaker, asking what if you're planting from scratch. Still there is still no straight answer, so it's not simply a language issue. I wonder if it's cultural thing, a reluctance to show your hand. All roads seem to lead to terroir.

It is not intellectual property: the controlling force is nature, but in one cellar I wonder if there's an unwillingness to pull away the cloak. As students at Ballymaloe we visited a Dutch chef who cooked at low temperature for long periods in sous-vide bags. One of the ingredients on his menu was smoke. He showed us the proofs of his cookery book. I asked if he was concerned about revealing his secrets. You can have



my recipes, he said, but you can't have me.

I am somewhere in the space between northern and southern hemispheres. I feel as though the New Zealanders are my family. I find myself slightly offended when one of the winemakers doesn't know where Otago is. I wonder if I am acting as a conduit or a barrier between these two worlds.

\*

Claude Chapuis, a lecturer in viticulture, writes in *Vineyard Tales*, that where Bordeaux is historically a Protestant commercial city, Burgundy's heritage is linked to the Catholic Church. As soon as I read this religion appears everywhere.

Before I first came to Burgundy, I joined a procession towards Congregation Hall at the University of East Anglia. The queue marched ahead of me, draped in the colours of the School of Literature Drama and Creative Writing: French navy with a coral band. When I looked at the sashes stretching out in front it looked as though I had joined a parade of Ulster Orangemen.

We stand in a tasting room under an oil painting a procession of winemakers on the feast of St Vincent, the patron saint of winemakers. It brings to mind Sir John Lavery's painting of the Twelfth of July. As we drive around, I cannot help noticing which vines have been clipped back. They look like the hedges bordering the farms in the Northern Ireland, tidied up in preparation for the marching season.

\*

In Beaune, I find daily interaction more problematic than interviews. Rather than worrying about who is *tu* and who is *vous*, I figure that if someone is old enough to work in a shop, I will address them as *Madame*. I too have become *Madame*. I begin to notice people wearing glasses; I watch how they frame the face. I am struggling with my first glasses.

I retreat to the solitude of the wine library tucked away in my rental apartment. There

is a magnificent set of *World of Fine Wine* journals. I am encouraged to read an article on Meyney, where I worked the harvest. It seems wasteful to stay inside but there is reassurance in the authorities. I am following my steps of the last year, re-reading Chapuis' book which I have already marked up. While I don't remember the content there is comfort in seeing the passages underlined. I hadn't realised Burgundians were so open to Pinot's performance beyond the Côte de Nuits. I'm encouraged to see Chapuis refer to the mobility of the grape. I am thinking of how Pinot has travelled successfully from Oregon to Otago. A few minutes later I re-read the paragraph. He has in fact written *nobility*.

The bifocals make it feel like I'm looking through a telescope. I feel a little off balance, almost seasick. One eye seems to find the correct spot in the lens while the other remains in blur. When I read feral instead of federal government, I ring the optician and ask him to replace them with simple reading glasses.

Terroir is not getting any clearer. It extends below the subsoil to the bedrock; it includes climate and weather even if you were to uproot the plants and take the soil with you, they would behave differently. It can't be peeled off like a fresco. Land cannot be moved, and yet it is a constant state of evolution. Like the human body, it constantly replaces itself.

Climates change; ice ages leave their mark on the land; global warming means less predictable weather; rising temperatures mean the grapes need to be picked earlier. The land itself cannot be uprooted. It's about ownership and strictly delimited boundaries. It defines through exclusion. Here. Not there. Postcodes define us economically and socially. I remember a client asking me to change the geographical description on his deed of transfer. When I think of the UNESCO application for the *climats* I get caught up wondering how the planning laws extend to the protection of vineyards.

I leaf through the books in the wine library, trying to make sense of everything. Many of the books are signed by the authors; the landlady must be an MW student. I plunder through Atheneum. Wine tarot cards sit beside the till, and beside them a book of wine horoscopes where predictions are clumped together in years predicting

vaguely benign planetary influences. I am tempted to buy a vintage chart, but the print is so small I can't read it.

My holiday reading is *Fool's Paradise*, by Steve Braunias, New Zealand's version of AA Gill. Braunias says 'New Zealand needs your guidance', as he asks readers to report sightings of the New Zealand cafeteria, where you get 'a hot cup of coffee poured straight from the pot'. He speaks fervently of the 'geographies of love [which] exist in the tearooms and coffee lounges of the nation,' He needs readers to help draw up a 'map of New Zealand we can measure in teaspoons'.

By the time I have made some small progress in understanding Burgundy, it will be time to go. Gareth, our WSET lecturer, warned us about the inability to access knowledge we forget we have. The unknown knowns, he termed this risk. Burgundy increases the awareness of your known unknowns.

I leave Alan and Rosie in Beaune. I haul my case up over cobblestones on the way to the train station. I take a seat facing against the direction of travel. My suitcase is packed with wine and purchases from Atheneum. Braunias's *Fool's Paradise* is protruding from an outer pocket.

As we reverse out of Beaune, I ask the passenger across the carriage if that's the Route Nationale running parallel with the track just a few fields away. I catch a glimpse of the Hill of Corton; a few minutes later the old Château at Clos Vougeot comes into view. By the time we pull out of Dijon, the vines have disappeared and fields of wheat flash past the window.

## Chapter 11

### Terroir: Reading Place

One summer I spent weeks proofreading the Companies Acts for a company law compendium. When I left the office, I found myself unable to read novels, even watch subtitled films. All I could see was commas and full stops, an invasion of punctuation flying towards me like objects in freefall. I think of that summer as I look at the city, above and below. Everything (I think) is *terroir*.

Mike Richmond, one of the pioneers of Pinot Noir in Carneros, California, wrote that the *terroir* of knowledge may be as significant a contribution to flavour as the soil and climate. My street, Bermondsey Street, feels like the centre of the wine world. When I speak to an editor from Australia, he knows the street from the WSET school. A new plaque has been erected on the side of Bermondsey Square marking the site of a Monastery of the Order of Cluny, the Benedictines of Burgundy. The monks resided here from 1082 to 1538.

Leather used to be tanned here; some of the old facades remain: the names still legible, paint on brickwork on warehouses that are now apartment buildings. There are Juliet balconies where raw materials used to be hauled up from street level. My eyes seek out what a local would see: vacuums where buildings once stood. That park was bombed during the war, you know, says an English friend as we walk past. I see electricians and internet providers opening doors to reveal lines of switches as though they are connecting a call to some central telephone exchange a century ago.

A landscaped park lies behind the Church of England at the far end of the street, with crypts dating back centuries. Cherry blossoms lie like snow. There are gravestones stacked up against the park wall; they lean one against each other like old oil paintings. I'm never sure when I'm walking over of the dead.

This place, London Bridge, feels like the centre of the universe. All human life is here, the Hummers and the white stretch limos and the sports cars with military

exhaust pipes and personalised plates that wait outside the Shard, and just down the river, GMT. In King's College Library early DNA models rise up behind the glass like spiral staircases into the future. There is evidence of trading on the site of Borough Market for a thousand years. Keats' rooms stand across from the Tube station; around the corner a plaque marks out the site from where the Canterbury pilgrims set off. You can see them everywhere, layers of geography and history: terroir.

Walking along the Southbank I pass the Globe. I see a door lying open, revealing what looks like a tool-shed, as though the city itself is a performance space. I feel as if I have caught a glimpse backstage.

I watch the evolution (or erasure) of this place. The Bishop of Southwark terms it ethnic cleansing when locals are priced out by property developers. NEW INSTRUCTIONS billboards lean up against estate agents' offices, advertising new wares as if they are an exotic delicacy; rents rise in expectations of investment yields with the arrival of the Crossrail while the residents climb over roadworks.

A deli opens beyond my apartment with wooden tables below an awning. A Golden Retriever sprawls across the pavement, somewhere between a doorman and a doormat.

Sections of the street are cordoned off. The surface of the street is pulled back to reveal black pipes which taper off at both ends and when you peer into the holes they look like the city is undergoing abdominal surgery, the organs isolated and clamped and laid to the side.

The roadworks have allowed rats to surface through new apertures in the dermis of the city. Thames Water remove a manhole covering. It is as though someone has drilled down to conduct some type of soil analysis. I see a ladder hewn into the tunnel wall, the rungs look like internal sutures holding the city in place.

As London is being carved out for Crossrail, I speed through passages dug out over a century ago. Occasionally a loud speaker announces a 'person under the train'. I

have read that there is a strange sort of communication between the driver and the deceased, that they often make eye contact just before impact. I imagine the drivers approaching the station platform, as though drawn towards an albatross. I think of Emily Pankhurst throwing herself under the King's horse at Ascot. As I wait for the train to pull in, I look away. I spot a toy-size mouse darting between the tracks. I think of bodies being thrown under trains, shovelled by invisible stevedores into the raging furnace of the gods of the city.

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A blackboard leans up against the Italian café announcing the arrival of fresh burrata. The soup kitchen has migrated around the corner, replaced by hoarding and a construction sign that says GRACIOUS LIVING.

Skateboarders pass; the sound bounces off the sides of the buildings. The dogwalker works off roller blades, a long rope tied around his waist. Tourists on bikes cycle against the one-way system, couriers dive through traffic. Dogs promenade up and down the street, bescarfed, bejumpered and bejewelled; one has its own pram. I watch the city bikes turn from Boris blue to Santander red. One day I pass Boris Johnson cycling from City Hall, puffing into the wind on a racer, not a Boris bike.

Every morning a line snakes around Becket House, the Immigration Enforcement Office. The exit that looks like the tunnel into the dressing rooms in a sports stadium except it is lined with barbed wire. The line winds around the side of the allotment, waiting without shelter, whispering in waiting room voices, leaning up against prams and pushchairs, seeking leave to remain. Even Becket House itself won't be there forever. I meet a member of staff at a party and he says the building won't survive the next rent review.

I think about terroir, about ownership. Late one night I hear drilling on the street. I can feel the building vibrate. Somewhere between sleep and wakefulness I imagine the workers drilling through the bedroom, right through to the back of the apartment as if they are going to lift it out like a shipping container. I remember my master describing the concept of apartment ownership to me as an apprentice solicitor. He

said you were not buying the structure of the building, you were buying a cube of air.  
I feel suspended over the street.

At night I can hear fireworks but can never see them or detect what direction they are coming from.

\*

A flier lands on the mat in late Spring. There will be filming the following week for a study of Giacometti, the Italian sculptor who lived in Paris. Trailer vans arrive to lay cables; the street art on the archway is covered over; a French Street sign is erected. Someone is spraying sawdust, then water to mimic rainfall, then blowing leaves onto the street. A lady with a headscarf pushes a pram. Traffic backs up, patient and uncomplaining, watching the woman in the headscarf walk the same ground again and again.

As the light falls Geoffrey Rush appears as Giacometti; he walks slowly down the street. Thanks everyone, says the director and they do it all again. The Shard towers overhead, outside of the camera frame. A few floors above the action, a cat watches from an open window. The cameras stop and someone says, can we do something about the suicidal cat? After two days' filming, the caballing, the cameras, the strip lighting along the alleyway are all gone. The French sign has disappeared and been replaced by an English sign, as though the act of erecting a sign changes place itself.

\*

I begin to think of place and terroir as performative. I think of how we brand place with political or artistic ink. I think of how we signal ownership; of how we impose limits on use, of what can be built, what can be planted where. I think of both plants and people on foreign soil. I think of the temporary yet permanent nature of place. I think of place as somehow perennial and unnatural.

In Casse Croûte bistro white paper covers are stretched over gingham tablecloths upon which waiters mark up the name of the guest and the number of their party. A

Victorian Grade II listed building further down the street reads TIME AND SETTLEMENTS. I sit English and Welsh land law exams (as an insurance policy) so my mind is alive to issues of how property is held and how it is protected. I see graffiti art that looks like the work of Banksy; some is protected behind a plastic frame. One shows a woman with a cat tail protruding from behind, where a bunny tail might be pinned. I think of the French AOC rules laying down what grape varieties can be grown where and in what density.

Someone has stencilled a black and white sketch of two children standing side by side, one holding up two fingers beside a message that reads RUDE CHILD. Parents keep posing their children beside it for photographs. Hoarding extends out from facades; soon the stencilled girl is half covered with scaffolding and the message reads .E CHILD as though e.e. cummings is working in reverse.

The city speaks. TAKE COURAGE it reads, paint sprayed onto gable wall, as the train screeches over Borough Market. I eavesdrop as the city makes its confession. The hair stylist leans forward, ready to grant absolution to the man who says, it's been four weeks since I was last here.

The city begins to feel like a tableau vivant. Walking along the river I am redirected back a block. I pass Blackfriar's Bridge. The traffic is backed up; I can hear sirens; a motorcade is approaching. It is 400 years since Shakespeare's death. I wonder if Queen Elizabeth is on her way to the Globe. It seems as though we are suspended between four centuries and two Elizabeths.

\*

I am thinking of terroir and borders, lines of demarcation. I go to a conference in Paris. I check in for the Eurostar. I clear French passport control in St Pancras Station, already on foreign soil. I attend a function in the New Zealand embassy. I stand in a reception room with a parquet floor in the seventh arrondissement, drinking Marlborough Sauvignon and Pinot from Central Otago.

I listen to papers by Katherine Mansfield academics on the ongoing debate over



where her younger brother was killed during the Great War. Mansfield wrote that he had been buried in France, but would have known that he fell across the border in Belgium. Perhaps she re-wrote the fable of their lives in exile, siblings dying in the same country.

When I come back to London I stand on the bridge over Canon Street as the Tour de France makes its way north to Yorkshire. Rather, I wait for the cyclists; I watch convoys of outriders, ambulances, and sponsors' vehicles. Women are strapped into the back of open topped floats, as if they might at any moment spring from their seats. They are showering the gathering crowd with tokens from the sponsors' vehicles, marked YORKSHIRE GOLD followed by Bonne Maman jam and strangely, insurance companies. Sporadically police outriders appear gesticulating wildly to the crowd to step back. The riders will pass through the City of London, following the route of ceremonial processions from the Tower of London heralding a new court. The crowd is pushing, children lurch forward to collect samples from the road. Some stick out hands hoping to be high-fived by policemen who push them back. Someone says the riders are still an hour away. Are the French police force armed, I wonder, on foreign soil? I think of the swordsman whose late arrival from Calais had delayed the execution of Anne Boelyn. The procession continues, the wails are becoming louder, closer together.

I often think of Anne Boelyn entering The Tower via Traitors' Gate as I walk along the river. I think of her daughter Elizabeth I making her way along the Thames as I take a boat out to out to Richmond. I can't shake the feeling of layers of history laid down on top each other.

As I think of terroir, of borders and lines of demarcation. I find myself transfixed by tattoos in yoga class. Someone is wearing a map of the world on their wrist, where you might spray perfume. I see a bar code, swirling Maori designs, yin/yang motifs and Chinese scripts. I see bleeding hearts and blood dripping from a dagger. There are family trees and chintz prints that clash with everything. I stare, forgetting that I am not invisible. My eye follows the contours of a vein that rises up along the upper arm like a river path, then summits the bicep, and reads LOVE CONQUERS ALL.

I think of slavery, or sheep that have been sprayed. When we turn to the back of the room the woman behind me straightens her white towel, marked PROPERTY OF NORTON ROSE FULBRIGHT. I stare at stamps like EU meat branding on beef intended for export. I think of how place marks us, and how we mark place.

Early one morning, smoke is rising from the towers in the distance of Canary Wharf as though the banks are sending out signals. Some mornings the city could be a Turner study, the lines faint on the page.

I watch the Thames sweep in, then out again.

I pass a tattoo parlour. I spend the day drafting and deleting, inserting and removing punctuation. On the way back the sign says Tattoos, and below that, Tattoo Removal.

## Chapter 12

### The Silverado Trail

I have begun to publish in the wine press. An editor suggests I attend a symposium of wine writers in Napa. When I write to winemakers their emails read, thank you for reaching out and I envisage hands stretched out, inviting me in.

Commuters file by construction workers in hard hats and down into the Jubilee Line. A man wearing a woolly cap nods, as if agreeing with the lyrics coming through on his headphones. The next time I'm outside, I'll be in San Francisco.

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The West Coast feels slightly foreign and when waiters lift my plate, I have to keep checking the urge to answer them in Spanish. If I use a figure of speech people stare and say, you've lost me there. I have an idea that California exists in a permanent summer. There are yellow daffodils on the tables; it must be springtime, but the Magnolias outside have already shed their petals (pink saucers with purple bruises) suggesting summer has already started. I hear what sounds like cicadas; the sound of heat. In the half-light, I can hear frogs calling out across the valley.

\*

As the symposium opens, we are asked to say a few words each about the person next to us. It strikes me that there are a lot of entrepreneurs in the room. One delegate is described as a valuable resource; another as a writer and a shooter. I listen to the language of possibility; attuned to the language of conflict (litigation) this is foreign to my ear.

Nothing is required of me here, I luxuriate into this extra, unexpected time. Jancis Robinson, MW, is in the queue for coffee. I wonder how she never looks sleep-deprived. I feel as though I am underwater.

One session follows into the next. We must be eyewitnesses, says one editor. Another advises us to pitch a story, not a place. Place, though, I think, is the story. I stretch out into the extravagance of sentences three times longer than they need to be. I listen to Morse codes in different frequencies, the sound of different typing speeds.

At lunch I pour from one of the bottles in the ice bucket and make my way out into the sun. I am vaguely aware that it is Ash Wednesday. Had I gone to church I would have heard *Remember man that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return*.

Billy Collins, recent American Poet Laureate, is the creative keynote speaker. Wine is bottled poetry, he says as he lifts a glass, quoting Robert Louis Stephenson. In fact, the editor had talked about him in the car on the way up from San Francisco. As we turned off onto the Silverado Trail, he said Stephenson had written *The Silverado Settlers* near here. As he wrote, vineyards across the world were being ravaged by phylloxera. Stephenson hadn't known whether the vines around him would survive. He might have been writing a eulogy for wine itself.

I watch Collins' foot tap in tune to the rhythm of his poetry. I write with my ear, he says. When someone asks why his poems don't rhyme, he says there are many forms of verse. It is like dancing, he tells her. If he chose to write in verse it would be like doing the same dance over and over.

The ice bucket in my room has been refilled; it melts, unused overnight. The cleaners have laid out a white face cloth in the bathroom, eyeliners and brushes lined up like instruments set out for surgery by the scrub nurse. They lie there, a challenge. I need to lift a pen and set to work.

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Jancis Robinson opens a tutored tasting the next morning at the Culinary Institute of America, set on the site of a Franciscan friary. There are twelve glasses set out at each desk, and stubby pencils that make me think of bookmakers' shops. We are

doing a vertical tasting from four Californian wineries, dating back to 1993. Glasses are raised and set back down in silence. Pencils tap out in code.

The younger wines show ripe fruits: blackcurrant, damson, black cherry, sweet spice, even eucalyptus and fig. The older wines show evidence of evolution: leather, forest floor, black plum compote, sweet spice and smoke. Some, I have marked a little out of balance; the alcohol is a bit high. Some of the wines remind me a little of Port.

If Pinot whispers this wine shouts. Some of the wines might make you wish you could adjust the volume, bringing to mind the advice we heard at cookery school. Remember, you have to eat a whole bowl of this, Darina would say, warning us not to over season. The wines are made to draw attention to themselves. Robert Parker likes Napa. The more robust the flavours, the more the wine will stand out, attracting higher Parker Points.

Perhaps that is the point of California: everything at full volume, high alcohol, fruit-driven wines that don't shy away from telling you how much money they make. At the Napa Premiere auction tastings there are tasters wearing badges declaring them PREVIOUS SUCCESSFUL BIDDER, like Best in Show rosettes.

Perhaps they are right to shout. California outperformed Burgundy and Bordeaux at the Judgment of Paris, the blind tasting conducted by Stephen Spurrier in 1976. These wines survived phylloxera. They survived Prohibition which lasted from 1919 until 1933; winemakers speak of wine running down the streets.

The first duty of a wine is to be refreshing, Jancis says, continuing a conversation between winemakers and wine writers going back pre-Pliny. I am interested in the lineage of these conversations. Sometimes I think of tasting notes as the wines talking, as though the wines themselves have a voice. Listen, the wine seems to whisper. Jancis says that one is sweet on the finish and WH Auden's *Tell me the Truth About Love* joins the conversation (in my imagination) and I find my own notes asking, *Is it sick on a swing?*

We drink from old to new in Europe, Jancis says, the older wines show more complexity. Jancis reveals each bottle as she takes us through her tasting notes, noting which years were blighted by early frosts, or rain; which years the fruit almost baked on the vines. Wine seems to play with time. It can take us back; it can outlive us. We're tasting our way through history, she says.

One of the writers at the symposium, a former professor of philosophy, Elaine Chukan-Brown, draws her tasting notes. Drawing is a kind of relief, she says, as it resets my verbal thinking. Her blog sets out three circles with an arrow pointing to the area where the circles intersect. I live here, she writes. I want to situate myself in the space where these areas overlap. I am interested in the poetry of wine.

Wine (I think) can distort our experience of time, it can suspend us in time. Wine allows us to inhabit past and future in the present tense.

Wine (I think) wants to tell us how deeply it has embedded itself into a place, how it proposes itself as an expression of the land. How it negotiates the space between itself and the world. It may express place or terroir, if as *le Petit Prince* would say, the conditions are favourable.

The wine (according to biodynamic practitioners) might reveal itself better on *leaf days* or *fruit days* which are listed in the bio calendar that brings back vague memories of the nuns' private chapel at our convent primary school, where the Saints days were marked in red.

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I arrange an interview at Freemark Abbey, the oldest winery in the area. There is no abbey. Abbey is a derivative of Albert; the name is an amalgam of the names of the three individuals who bought out the business in the '70s. Freemark Abbey was one of the ten Californian wines in the 1976 Judgement of Paris.

A generous selection of wines is poured under Corovin, a device invented by an MW student that allows you to pour wine without opening the bottle. It looks like a robust

bottle opener, except that a fine syringe is inserted through the foil and into the cork. It looks like an insect removing nectar. The alchemy is that the cork seems to repair or grow back (I imagine a scuffed knee repairing itself). It feels like allowing you access to the past, the story of what happened that year. It allows you to be fully in the present (the glass in your hand). It allows you to give a progress report, to imagine how much longer it will hold. The wine shows its face, briefly, then continues to mature, to hold its secrets to itself.

The Corovin lets you stretch back in time, as though piercing the amniotic fluid to conduct tests while the infant continues to develop in vitro, but you can conduct these trials without opening the bottle or disturbing the infant. I watch the wine remaining in the bottle as though it is being saved for the afterlife.

We drive to the Buena Vista winery in Sonoma Valley. The owner, Jean Charles Boisset, a Burgundian winemaker, has designed the tasting room in the style of a Gatsby party; there are fur stoles strewn over the back of barstools. Champagne saucers are stacked into a pyramid, and you can imagine champagne cascading down, flowing into the tiers below. The glasses look like they might withstand an earthquake, like they might sway with the earth's motion. For reasons I can't quite fathom, wine seems to be attracted to both the ephemeral and the permanent; vineyards stand on fault lines like cathedrals that survive natural disasters.

Boisset has imported a collection of antique viticultural tools. They are on display upstairs, a wall mounted archive. The lights are dimmed. The instruments are moving. They bring to mind a children's play, clouds moving slowly across the stage. Shadows flick across the wall; shovels look like spear heads. As the colours change the tools appear to be in motion. The scythes resemble Viking boats cutting through waves. They look like currachs, the rowing boats that carried provisions to the islands off the west coast of Ireland to last through the winter. They make me think of the boat that set off from Kerry, headed for the United States, the Brendan Voyage.

I think of the spade rasping against the soil as Heaney's father digs underneath his window. I wonder if wine has become a little altar, or the nature table we used to

make in school to hold jars of frogspawn, acorns and autumn leaves. I wonder if it is a sanctuary, somewhere to shelter my fears and aspirations. I am projecting meanings onto tools which would offend the men who toiled for years, swearing at blisters, cursing the weather, farmers with hands as big as shovels. I wonder has wine become a receptacle to hold treasure as much as an expression of place.

That night Boisset is to host a gala party; there were chocolate-covered acrobats last year, but our senses are saturated. Four of us go out to dinner, two from the US, two from the British Isles. The others have been in this world for decades. They are talking about a trophy wine. One of the Americans thinks it is linear. He says the wine seems to flatline, rather than show peaks and troughs. It is, he says, like an orgasm that goes on *waaaay too long*.

\*

The programme includes a series of one-to-one sessions with editors, to be conducted *speed-dating style*. I miss a step on my way down the stairs to collect my time slots. A slip-on shoe slips off. I hear *Is she alright?* My handwritten notes fall around me. Time slows down, then stops. I imagine myself landing at Jancis's feet: prostrating myself at the Master's sandals.

Two men with clip boards bring risk management forms, interrupting my one-to-one session. I stare down at the forms. Perhaps they might like to come back later, says Jancis. I had pitches prepared: ideas for short humorous sketches as well as more serious pieces, but they have all got tangled up in the rush that follows an accident, when you want to pretend nothing happened. I can't find my notes. Embarrassment gives way to pain.

\*

After the symposium I set out, left ankle bandaged, in an automatic car. I have a few winemakers to interview. I keep going, past Sonoma, where we saw the champagne saucers and the fur throws and the viticultural tools on the wall. I keep going until I



get to Yountville, where the whole town is an homage to food. I pass Thomas Keller's French Laundry. I try to get into Bouchon, a bistro, sister restaurant to the French Laundry; instead I eat across the road in a place which turns over tables quickly but doesn't rush me as I spread out my notes. They ask, how are you today? And (even though I am eating alone), you guys get some tasting in? I watch the queue for Bouchon rise and fall, casting a shadow against the wall, a sundial. Early the next morning two girls are spinning across the mosaic floor of Bouchon bakery, spinning in circles, pushing back with their roller blades. They take their croissants and spin out into the distance, disappearing into an overexposed sun.

Somehow the car merges into the freeway on the return to the airport. Rows of mustard flower flash by the windows as though Easter is approaching; it is February. It feels as though I'm suspended somewhere between time and place. No place is foreign, Robert Louis Stephenson wrote, we are the foreign ones.

Night has fallen as I head across the Golden Gate Bridge; it feels as though I am burrowing back into winter. I pay the fine for a part of the car which has fallen off, without my knowledge, somewhere between the Silverado Trail and San Francisco. I sit in the sun with a bag of ice on my ankle. When the ice melts, I board the plane back to London.

\*

I attend Urgent Care at Guy's Hospital. I have good material here, I think as I sit with my foot elevated. A stream of consciousness comes out; images begin to offer themselves. I find myself laughing as I remember falling. At least no-one saw it, I had said to one of the other delegates, but she said, we *all* saw it. And there was this *huge* thud. I remember grimacing through my one-to-one. Seriously Jancis, I'd said, I'm really funny.

I sit hunched on a sofa in a coffee shop in London Bridge. It arrives quickly in the end, quietly insistent, forcing forces its way out, tumbling down the lines and I follow it, trying to trust the voice. I go with it, as a very joyful symposium expresses itself as a slightly mournful poem.

\*

A little stunned, I get onto the Tube, the jet lag like a persistent hangover. I feel like an infant snatched from sleep, confused and slightly cross, my bandaged ankle squashed into boots that are too tight. It feels dream-like, as though this trip happened to someone else.

Robert Parker and his team of writers are sitting under artificial lights, behind a desk in an upper room in the Landmark Hotel in Marylebone. An announcement is expected. Parker is in late middle age. During the press conference, he is addressed always as Mr. Parker. For someone who has generated such strong feeling, there is something avuncular about him. He speaks softly, almost patiently. When I heard back from him researching for my MA his response startled me; the email seemed to hold more weight than the essay itself.

A man from Nyetimber English Sparkling Wine is pouring at the back of the room. He tells me he worked a harvest as a student, on the Côte Rôtie of the Northern Rhône. The hills were so steep there were poles protruding from the earth that you needed to grab onto them like a mountaineer.

Parker introduces the team who write for *The Wine Advocate*. The scene looks like a tableau vivant of the Last Supper. We sit, a small group of writers, as Parker passes the mantle of Bordeaux *en primeur* tastings to his English writer, Neal Martin. We observe another moment in wine history, like witnesses to a royal birth.

Meanwhile, the world keeps spinning on its axis as I watch, thinking of poles soldered into the hillsides of the Rhône, all of us reaching out, holding on.

## The Silverado Trail

Thank you for reaching out, said the emails,  
and not speaking American, I envisaged hands  
stretching out, inviting me into the afterlife.

I wish you could have seen the silver sliver of the moon  
that looked like someone was holding a torch  
under its chin and gone to sleep to the sound of frogs calling out

across the valley as the mountains became silhouettes  
in French navy. I wish you'd followed as we footstepped  
Robert Louis Stevenson's honeymoon path along the Silverado Trail.

You'd have loved the cedar wood, sweet spice and cinnamon on the nose,  
the flashes of plum and prune, the tobacco and leather that lingered  
on the palate as we drank our way back through history. Wine,

as Stevenson said, is bottled poetry. I wish you'd listened  
as the wine told us what the moon was doing that year.  
It carried hope as well as memory; it talked of the past;

it promised a future. It told us about the land of its birth.  
It cut through layers of geography and geology,  
from the soil to the soul. I wish you'd seen the rows

of Sauvignons and Chardonnays, the Cabernets dark  
as squid ink. I wish you'd seen the double doors swing  
open with more ceremony than a state banquet

as the waiters filed in as gracefully as the first time you saw  
Swan Lake. That night held the ghosts of laughter, echoes  
of conversation that lingered on the tongue for days.

It would have carried you back to a state of innocence.  
The photos would have reflected your face smiling into  
the camera, your lips stained with purple ink,

like a child's face smeared with birthday cake.  
I wish you'd witnessed how the sun tiptoed  
across the Pacific to the Golden Gate Bridge: that tunnel

back into winter. I wish you'd seen how the workers  
waxed and waned over the vines, like turf cutters  
digging into the bog, then pausing for the Angelus.

## Chapter 13

### *En Primeur*

Armed with a recently-acquired press pass I board a flight to Bordeaux. A good proportion of the UK wine trade is on this flight from Gatwick to the *En Primeur* '15 campaign. The press will mark up their observations on the barrel samples at the end of the week's tastings and these will inform the opening trades. Within the next week emails will issue from wine merchants across the world, inviting their customers to purchase wines from the first tranche of the *en primeur* offerings. This is my first formal trade tasting outside of London; this is my first *primeur*.

The plane feels like a mobile wine library. I pass Stephen Brook as I make my way up the cabin. When we take off I open a book of his essays on Bordeaux; they go back a few years, but I am enjoying his insight into the Bordelais.

Gendarmes watch as we wait at the luggage carousel, machine guns resting across bulletproof vests. France is still in a State of Emergency in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks. They follow us past the few rows of vines planted outside on the short walk from Arrivals; they wait as we queue at the car rental kiosks. Most of the press will use Bordeaux city as a base, but I am staying in St. Estèphe. I can't drive too far: a certain amount of alcohol is absorbed with each sample (even when you use the spittoon) so I am limiting my tastings. I ask for directions and make my way north towards the Médoc.

\*

The Médoc is a 97 km long flat drive. Bordeaux benefits from the moderating influences of the Gulf Stream, the coastal forests and the Gironde. Pine forests and nude sunbathing, our lecturer had said. If there was no forest there would be no Bordeaux, he said.

Time is how Bordeaux is judged, our lecturer told us, on the wine's ability to age. '82 was a stunning year. It was the year that made Robert Parker's reputation, he was the first to call it when the others had queried the young wines. It is known as the American vintage. The *en primeur* campaigns have waned somewhat. Many investors lost money in years where the opening bids were high; they have begun to look elsewhere to invest, but this year the early reports are good; there is a great deal of excitement surrounding the '15s.

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'Returning was a marvellous and disorienting experience,' George Szirtes wrote of his native Hungary, 'more than anything, it was place and space that hit me. Our early life imprints a kind of map on our reflexes.' As I follow the Gironde beyond Pauillac, I remember the canopy of plane trees. Szirtes says 'if I think of the notion of home, I think of this love of landmarks – streets, courtyards, stairways, in my case – their spatial punctuation and their sensual coding. The first place is the most real place.' This is the place I first took up a pair of secateurs.

I don't remember much until I see the fishing nets cantilevered over the Gironde. I can see Château Meyney from the road. There is nobody at the fishing huts when I stop; the nets have been drawn up out of the water. The images of that year though are still stored on my digital camera as I stand across the road from the château. Are you sure you want to delete this? the camera asks, before I wipe off pictures taken that year. I hang my head over the screen, thumbs texting as fast as a teenager. I think of learning to type, remembering the patterns the fingertips made. I think of my grandmother working her crochet hook as I keep freeing up memory space. I am writing over the past.

The *maître de Chai* was celebrating twenty years at the château when I worked here in '09. He will have no memory of me, another student passing through at harvest. Richard the man who showed me how to break the cap of the skins rising to the top in the stainless steel vats, will have gone. Didier, who worked on the sorting table (*vous êtes mariée?*) will have gone. When I walk the estate, the tractor driver will not remember me. No one will remember me.

I am staying at Château Ormes de Pez, a small château with a few guest rooms attached to the winery. I haul my luggage up the spiral stairs and unpack clothes still on their hangers. I was unsure what clothes to bring, what the *en primeur* scene might involve, but I find myself wearing almost the same thing every day. I head out on a bicycle in the evenings with a view out over the vines.

Ormes de Pez is the second, very much more affordable wine of Lynch-Bages. The manager takes a half bottle of Château Ormes de Pez and opens it with some ceremony, a white linen napkin in his hand. The '15 campaign begins at the kitchen table. I put my nose in the glass and I smell the future.

Jancis Robinson calls the *en primeur* samples 'six month old babies' from the barrel. These samples will continue to evolve even when they are bottled, before they are ready to be drunk. Neil Martin, who writes for *The Wine Advocate*, talks of 'pre-natal scans' when he revisits sample years after their tastings *en primeur* to assess their progress. Parker said it was essential to start the day with a decent breakfast when he did the *en primeur* tastings himself, and I take him at his word. This bread is wonderful, I say to the host, and he seems happy that someone is enjoying it. The Americans never eat it, he says.

I pass a sign that reads *Précieux Terroir, Saint Estèphe* under an image of a bunch of grapes, each grape depicted as a stone. The soils of the left bank are made up of gravel, sand and clay. The gravel retains heat, allowing the Cabernet Sauvignon grape to reach maturity about a fortnight after the Merlots are in and in the tanks. Our diploma lecturer said the great years in Bordeaux are the Cabernet Sauvignon years when the grapes can be left on the vines. Without gravel, he said, there would be no Mouton, no Latour, no Lafite.

I pull the car up to the spot where the locals used to lace up their hiking boots. I park at the *Parking Privé* sign. It is six years since I sat with the *porteurs*, the identical twins also turning forty. The '09s will be showing well now but have longer to go.

The dorms are closed. Someone has stencilled duck patterns onto the bathroom wall. It is six years since I was here, six years since I saw my reflexion in the bathroom mirror. The last time I looked in this mirror I was ready to go home; the *vendangeurs* were getting rowdier every evening; one of the toilet seats was lying on its side. I would wake up in the mornings, wearing most of my clothes, feeling slightly too warm, as if I'd slept in a tent. One morning I woke to find that my eye mask had gone. I looked ridiculous, mummied in a purple pashmina.

It is six years since I followed the *maître de chai*, the cellar master, clipboard in my hand, noting down his figures, as he poured pink juice from the tanks into test tubes, holding them up to the light. The *maître* asks if I would like to go back to see the *grandes millésimes*, the great vintages. As he calls out the years, I find my figures have gone rusty since I last followed him. I stand in a glass antechamber separated from the cellar, a bottle from the year of my birth in my hand. He lifts bottles from the shelves, calling out vintage dates and when he is called out of the room I repeat them in English for the benefit of the recording, like a dentist dictating to a nurse.

The '15s are lined up across the counter in the tasting room. Meyney is part of the CA Grands Crus portfolio. Their focus is Asia; most of their sales will be made *en primeur*. Their clients are not speculators; clients buy Meyney to drink it. They took their time for the '15 harvest. Some other estates were finished before they started. There was some rain, but they weren't affected thanks to their good drainage. The average age of their vines they say is about thirty-five to thirty-six years. Their oldest vintage is 1924.

Meyney was one of the first sites to be planted out in the Médoc. In 1662 the château was a convent owned by the Feuillants monks. The soil is Garonne Gravels, clay-limestone. Meyney is unusual in that it has a vein of blue clay in the subsoil at around 2.6 metres.

I close my eyes and put my nose in the glass. Should I call them wines or samples?

When the press verdict is delivered most excitement will be expressed about Margaux. The Tour de Mons, from Margaux I find nose puckering; the tannin coats

my teeth. I see spice and black fruit; it is long on the finish. I taste another Margaux, Château Marsac Seignan Tour de Mons. It has black cherry, dark savoury prune and liquorice; there is spice and tobacco and leather on the long finish.

Meyney is restrained in comparison. I see cedar and blackcurrant. It is velvety, it has ripe fruit with the length and depth of cooked fruit. It feels chalky, almost dusty over the palate. It is black, savoury, meaty; it has leather and tobacco with a long finish. This is a masculine wine.

The Grand-Puy Ducasse is nose-tingling; I smell cedarwood and cinnamon, and I know you can't smell tannins, but I know they are there. This wine has the first hint of red fruit of the day, like a savoury red cherry, and red spicy plum that feels like it is worked over a black tapestry.

Other tasters arrive in flurry of handshakes and hasty notes; part of the relay race between the châteaux. They smell and write and nod their heads; then they are gone. I take my time.

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PR professionals with clipboards mark guests off their lists and usher them towards the marquee entrance at Château Lafon Rochet. I spend a couple of minutes with each sample, marking up my notes like speed dates and moving on to the next. I run into my first wine teacher from Ireland. I'd start that way, she says, pointing to the other side of the room; they become more tannic at this end. A light the shape of a sombrero hangs overhead.

Some have great length; I am still tasting them long after the trip to the spittoon. They'll need to put on weight, of course, but an image starts to come together of the wines as an outline. I have mapped out fruit, acidity, tannins and chalky tannins, tobacco, leather, then the length, the markers the wine will expand to meet.



Château Ormes de Pez is louder somehow than when I tasted it at the château last night. Yesterday it was almost cumulative; today it is still red on the palate, ripe red cherry; spice still tingles on the tongue. I can still taste it minutes later.

I see people that I know or know their faces from the world of wine. Others look like people from home. I begin to superimpose faces onto bodies as I look around the room. Someone wears his hair greased back like the Godfather, a silk square folded into a triangle in his jacket pocket. The man behind me is swearing a peaked farmers' hat, and across the room someone is wearing a Stetson. *En primeur* is wine Fashion Week. My page is splashed with wine; it resembles a Jackson Pollock.

I would expect to find plum even prune, tobacco, leather, smoke, blackberry in the Cabernets, and plum in the Merlot, but over the next few days I am constantly surprised by red fruit. As I move through the wines my empty glass takes on a blue tinge. When I leave my glass back I feel entitled to a finishers' badge. The wooden box bearing the message *Merci de déposer vos verres ici* brings to mind an infant's coffin. There are cars parked up along the verges of the vineyards and they look like they belong to mourners lining the roadside at a country funeral.

When I go back that night the trees behind are in bloom in the enclosed garden behind Château Ormes de Pez, white blossoms, apples, or perhaps cherries; next season's growth.

\*

In Château Bellevue a whole wall has been lined out with half bottles. I have to angle the camera phone to get them all into the frame as they close off into the horizon.

The procedure is explained as a booklet listing the wines is handed over. I'm not entirely sure where I should start. It's as you wish, they say, and it feels like being faced with a restaurant wine list so impressive you don't want to appear ridiculous to the sommelier. I can't see anyone else's tasting notes. I am surrounded too by the authorities: not the books or the journals, but the writers themselves. I feel as though I am opening an examination paper.

The bottles arrive out, pre-stacked into boxes of six – if you want to taste one of the wines the whole box is brought to your desk. I let the pen go where it will, checking a tendency to second guess myself, to edit out the aromas I have written down for fear I am doing it wrong.

The ticket on each label is marked with the word *Échantillon*, which I presume signifies sample, not for sale. The labels have black ink stamps, as though they have arrived in the post and been marked with the date of delivery. Do the dates mean best before or best after? A label reads *Valable jusqu'au 8 avril 2016*; the labels make me think of milk cartons. As the week goes on, I see different dates stamped onto labels before they have to return to the barrel. They read, *Échantillon*, as though the wines are introducing themselves, *enchanté*.

I ask for the dry whites, the blends of Sauvignon and Semillon. Often the samples suggest a serious dinner party is about to commence. I set to tasting, a short few lines on each sample. I don't want to mark them /100 or /20. I want to record my own observations to distinguish one sample from the next in a series. I used to make notes to remind myself about witnesses so I could distinguish them afterwards, so I could make some sense of the testimony as a whole.

There are flashes of white pepper on the tongue, which I often get but never see on others' tasting notes and I'm not sure if it's pepper or something I can't describe. I fly through a series of samples noting pear and green apple, often zesty. Some show lemon juice, bruised gold apple. The oak of course will need time to settle in. Often the nose is shy, restrained. One of the samples shows great length but the flavours need to settle down. There seems to be a skirmish on the palate, a pushing between the oak and the fruit like a litter of puppies jostling for position.

I raise my hand like an exam student asking for more paper. They arrive at my table with more samples, half bottles stacked into a wooden basket like a waiter bringing condiments to the table in a steakhouse, as though they might ask, you guys all set here?

I call for the reds. I taste redcurrant, blackcurrant, tannin, savoury, smoke, toast, tobacco, flash of cassis, *very good*; bramble, leather, tobacco, high acidity (a little out of balance); *good to very good* (almost hearing the cadence of the shipping forecast rising and falling).

I think of the wines I tasted in Napa, the Bordeaux blends (Cabernet/Merlot), the higher alcohol giving them almost flashes of Port. I find myself comparing these samples to Napa. These samples present themselves like restrained Napa, Napa post rehab.

Every so often I stand up and stretch. A man in jeans sets his black briefcase on the table, clicking it open as if to show dollars stacked up in unmarked notes. Men are shaking hands or hugging. Someone says, If I don't see you in the next twenty-four hours, I'll see you in Hong Kong. This one is the benchmark for Margaux, says the merchant across the way, guiding Asian buyers through the list. This, my first *en primeur*; this is my benchmark.

Other tasters leave, like students who complete their paper before the allocated time. Some look vaguely familiar. Their observations will set the market. Someone says, *Ça va être cher*.

They keep coming, the samples, like books ordered up from the stacks in the British Library, the labels stamped as though with return dates. I persevere through palate fatigue; someone experienced would taste faster and taste fewer samples. I see flashes of colour (fruit), but they need to be filled in. I see an outline, the architecture of the wines.

Somewhere towards the end I am surprised by sour red cherry over a damson backdrop. There is oak present, but in the wings, *restrained*. One of the St. Emilions has damson, prune, plum, sweet spice, cinnamon, cedarwood and a very long finish. *Very good to outstanding*. The next one has pronounced leather and tobacco, soft prune, velvet, pronounced but soft tannins, damson, ripe black plum, long spicy finish. I feel the outline of my tongue tingling. I imagine this even on the nose.

I stop at Château Pavie. I think it has tar on the nose, but is still quite closed; on the palate, red sour cherry, red sour plum, the spice when it comes is restrained; the tannin is there to hold it together. The fruit needs hardly anything done to it, it tastes of itself; the sourness is refreshing. The length is a silent whisper. I can almost make out what it's saying.

At lunch I sit surrounded by the authorities. Stephen Spurrier and Stephen Brooke are here. The men sitting around the door stand up when Jancis comes in. Someone asks her impression of the wines. She is polite but restrained. *Très élégant*, she says. We start with oysters; course follows course and vintage follows vintage and I am trying not to drink anything beyond the glass of champagne I was given on the way in to refresh the palate. The others climb into people carriers with drivers and I make the short journey back home and climb the spiral staircase.

When I come down later, the host has left a cold supper on the kitchen table. As I walk the perimeter of the estate the trees are throwing shadows through the pink light; they look like they are breakdancing across the lawn, bending, hyperextending their limbs as they stretch back and down, throwing shadows across the lawn.

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As the week presses on I think of the wines that will spread out in time to fill the outline. I think of myself stretching into middle age. I wish I had packed my running gear among the twenty kilos of clothes hanging in my wardrobe.

Bordeaux is known as the Protestant, commercial centre of wine, yet it feels like doing the Stations of the Cross as I drive along. I am confused. I keep seeing a crucifix where the roads intersect between the vines; maybe I am driving around in circles.

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I am brought to a separate table at Château Pontet Canet. The bottle is opened with some ceremony. The cork is removed, the ruby liquid swirls around the decanter. It falls down the sides like a silk scarf.

I swirl the wine around too vigorously; my tasting notes are wearing the wine, the ink displaced like a watercolour wash.

I ask Albert Tesseron, the owner, about terroir and the château's biodynamic practice. He introduces the viticulturist, Jean Michel Comme. I was not born with biodynamics, he says. I am engineer, an oenologist. And to me they don't have to be seen against each other. After some years I understood that I had to reconsider everything to really understand. My work is no more a work, it's a mystical path. I'm not religious – but I have a vision of my work with religious approach.

Our knowledge is the knowledge of nature and we use only symbolic knowledge, everything means something. The other tasters, in Stetsons and ten-gallon hats, could be other universes rotating around us.

An artist is someone who receives a gift from nature, for painting, for writing music, or cooking, that permits them to provide emotion. And a great terroir to me is at this level, to produce grapes that will be able to move people. The definition of a great wine I have in mind is a wine that can make people cry or shiver.

Vines are much more than only basic plants. You have an apple tree here, it will produce the same apples with the same taste. you plant a new one, it will produce the same taste. It's not the case with vines. They express the terroir and they have something that is animal that puts the vines above the other plants.

And vines are not to be considered as a basic crop because going back to the Bible, you have two important plants; wheat and vines. Vines should not be considered as a source of calories. Wheat feeds the flesh, vines feed the soul, and it's very different.

And now viticulture applied to the vine makes, it's the same way of thinking as for wheat or apple trees and at the end you have wine that provides no more emotion. They just rate it, spit it. That's it.

Wines and especially the great wines, have to feed the soul, to be focused on emotion. And everything we do here is with this idea of getting the emotion. I don't want to say that we succeed, but it's what we have in mind. I want to see in the people's faces when they taste the wine. Sometimes it happens, very often not, but it's my search, it's my *cathédrale*.

When I get back to Château Ormes de Pez the trees are in yoga poses; they stretch into crab as the branches bend backwards in the rose pink light.

\*

It is raining as I drive into St. Julien. The tasting room is bright, with a view out to the old château. One the labels reads Château Gloria; it depicts two angels with hunting horns crossed over their heads. It is stamped *04 avril 2016* like a visa about to expire.

I climb to the top of a tower surrounded by lattice metalwork. The wind is carrying the rain so that it hits us in italics. The soil is grey, the sky is grey. Light flashes through the lattice pattern. The vines are lying low about a metre apart, like well-tended war graves, little crosses marking the fallen.

When they wanted to draw a client consultation to a close my barristers used to say, I have enough to draft at this stage. The trade will file their reports. I have enough to draft.

The EU flag flies beside the French. This will be the last *en primeur* before the Brexit vote.

The rain is closing in in waves.

\*

A woman called H  l  ne pours the wines at Ch  teau Lynch-Bages. This is the last tasting. I have my nose right into the glass, eyes closed. H  l  ne takes me through the ch  teau. We fall silent in the cellar. The barrels are lined up like antique rocking cradles. Her voice drops to a whisper. They are sleeping, she says.

Would you like to see the old cellar, she asks, and we climb up stairs to see the old farm machinery. There are old keys hanging up against a door painted the Burgundy red of my first school uniform. I am walking across the slatted floor over my grandmother's barn: bags of barley and millet and oats are lying beside bales of hay. There are doors leading into the milking byre. The air smells of meal.

Perhaps terroir is the place that made you. Perhaps it starts with your mother resting in sun for the last months of summer, perhaps it is the smells that surrounded your childhood, farmyard smells, the hot musty smell of the upstairs barn. It is on the stony soil of the M  doc that I sat in the sun in my fortieth year as the *porteurs* said the constellations were favourable.

My year, 1969, wasn't actually a great vintage in Bordeaux. The conditions that year favoured Burgundy.

I have come to swirl the wine, spit it, rate it.

I have come here to taste wines that can make you shiver, make you cry.

I have come here to smell the past. I have come here to predict the future. The wines in the cellars below are still in their early infancy leaving us standing here in the complex territory of the present, for which there is no tasting score.

***En primeur 15***

for Stephen Skelton, MW

Are you sure  
you want to delete  
this, it asks (my card is full)  
as images of the year

I came here appear on screen  
and I take a last look at the sun  
rising over Everest, as the Gironde slips  
past my feet, brown as the Ganges, and as wide.

It is six years since I came through  
the canopy of plane trees to fishing nets  
cantilevered over water, six years  
since I saw my name written in pen

at the bottom of the list pinned up  
on the door of the *dortoir femmes*;  
six years since I set my feet into boots  
and set off for the Merlot,

cutting everything in sight,  
terrified of wasting anything that grew  
on this land; six years since Didier lifted the  
raisined fruit that made it as far

as the second sorting table, asking,  
*Vous etes mariée?* and saying,  
*De temps en temps*, when I asked him;  
six years since I followed the *maître de chai*

as he called out readings from the tanks,  
clutching a dictionary and frowning  
into a clipboard and asking him to check  
my numbers were correct.

A buyer from Hong Kong says, This one  
is the benchmark, and the bottles keep coming,  
like books ordered up from the stacks, their labels  
stamped as though they are library books on loan.

The sense that I am being tested  
(and not the wine) hovers as I stumble  
through bramble and blackcurrant,  
through oak, tobacco and smoke,



through blackberry  
and boysenberry,  
through red cherry and damson,  
surprised by violet.

They keep coming, in baskets,  
delivered like early morning milk; they make  
my nostrils prickle; some are silent, short  
on the nose but long on the finish;

there are flashes of prune, but savoury prune,  
suggestions of leather, and afterwards  
I feel the outer limits of my tongue tingling,  
and imagine a neurologist mapping out nerve damage.

I wonder if Napa pre Napa tasted like this,  
then remember a cousin saying,  
It's just like Chicken Run, except with people,  
when he watched The Great Escape.

Afterwards, we stand in the cellar,  
the barrels lined up like cots.  
They are not yet wines;  
they whisper

rather than shout,  
and I think of our lecturer saying,  
We are writing drafts here,  
not poems.

## Chapter 14

### London Trade Tasting

It strikes me as strange when people say, I work in the City, rather than, I'm a solicitor, or, I work in finance. It seems odd to hear them define their career in terms of geography rather than profession. Place seems to define everything.

The wine trade is centred here, in London. Producers keep coming to show their wines, the mountain to Mohammed. I attend trade tastings across London. Many of them take place in the City's Guilds and Livery Companies. I live just beyond the City limits. I print out directions from Transport for London. I slip into flat shoes and set out. I taste and return.

I stand in the Court Room of Vintners Hall as the archivist quotes from Pepys. Vintners Hall he tells me, survived the Great Fire. We pause in front of a framed stretch of cloth. The colours have faded since it was originally woven; they have settled from vibrant gold and reds into brown and pale gold (you use the same descriptors for ageing wines). This was used to drape over coffins, says the archivist. The folds are draped over the four sides of the box, like a valance. It was, he says, part of the Cloth of Gold and was donated to the Company in 1539. It was used to give members of the company a decent burial, and would have been removed after the ceremony, like a table cloth. Only twelve are known to survive; seven are owned by livery companies in the City of London.

The caterers are setting up for lunch. Later, a Master of Wine takes us through a tutored tasting, seated in what looks a throne in a room surrounded by royal assents. A framed document hangs on the wall. It bears the signature of Geoffrey Chaucer's father, a wine merchant. The City is starting to make sense.

\*

I head north towards Smithfield. A huge grey metal bell hangs outside the entrance to Haberdashers' Hall. The hall is a modern redbrick building around a cloister. As I register I see two ornate ships fashioned entirely out of pearls in different sizes, like necklaces spilling out of jewellery boxes, booty overflowing across the decks, the spoils of war.

There are two portraits hanging, images of Elizabeth I, also in pearls, and Charles II by her side. They are beaten into what looks like tin, the sides corrugated like the edge of an apple tart. When I attempt to take a photograph my own image appears, a ghost hovering in the background.

They are setting up for a masterclass on The Taste of Turkey with Peter McCombie, MW. Men are lifting tall tables, their surfaces little wider than serving plates. They are swathed in white cloth, tied half way down like giant bridal bouquets, and when the men lift them, they look like they're dancing across the floor.

We sit in wide wooden seats like carvers at a dinner table, the names of the members of the Livery Company etched across the back. Turkey, to my surprise, has the fifth largest vineyard area in the world. Its history stretches back to the beginning of viticulture. Turkey vies with Iran and Georgia as the birthplace of viticulture.

Turkey has a diverse terroir, a lot of which is relatively uncharted. A map of the country stretches across the projector, straddling the boundary between Europe and Asia. It looks like the irregularly-shaped missing piece from a jigsaw. The Mediterranean section to the south-west makes me think of the gastric tract and when it is highlighted in yellow it looks like bile, as though the gut has become inflamed. Parts were almost wiped out by phylloxera. There are vineyards in the eastern quadrant of the map. McCombie, a New Zealander, talks of visits to the vineyards under armed escort. He points to the Gallipoli Peninsula and I wonder if these vines are standing on the graves of his countrymen.

Producers are lined around the perimeter of the tasting room. There's real enthusiasm to enter the market. The country offers native grapes as well as international varieties so there's a huge diversity of styles. There's a rich Rhône style, and for some reason

robust reds can remind me of blood. When I ask questions, their answers are grammatically correct, but extend beyond the comfortable limit of conversation. It is as though each paragraph has been rehearsed for an exam. Their explanations anticipate the next question. No one mentions political unrest.

An antique clock bearing the name Murray + Stachan, Cornhill London stands over the fireplace; it gives a sort of unworldly chime, sending us into a hypnotic state.

\*

I observe the rituals of the trade. When I first attend London Wine Fair delegates are signing a book of condolences for Serge Hochar, the beloved winemaker of Château Musar in Lebanon.

Producers take the time to talk about their terroir. At the GO WEST North American wine fair I get into conversation with an MW about a 1975 Pinot from Eyrie Vineyards in Oregon. He looks around and says, none of these other stands would be here today were it not for this wine. Some of the stands bear signs that say SEEKING REPRESENTATION. I think of JK Rowling's portrait at London Book Fair suspended from the ceiling like a benign dictator.

\*

I attend the Bordeaux Grand Crus tasting in Church House in Westminster. This is the first year Robert Parker will not file his report. I watch Neal Martin speak to the Bordelais winemakers.

My eyes follow the gold lettering around the rotunda overhead. I used to attend medico-legal conferences in this hall. I sat in this space as a surgeon spoke of a risk management initiative where students mapped the movements of his hand during surgery. I spend these days studying under different supervision. I taste as portraits of monarchs watch over us, I taste beneath gilt mirrors and windows looking out across the city. I am still learning, still watching.

CA Grands Crus (Château Meyney's parent company) is hosting a vertical tasting at Lutyens Restaurant on Fleet Street. These wines have filled out in comparison to the *en primeur* samples I tasted in Bordeaux. I am tasting the wines in colour (rather than as an outline). I am drawn to the Meyney '09, my wine. It is ready to drink now but it will continue to evolve. I taste black fruit that lasts on the length. Spice maps the U-shaped outline of the tongue, coffee and mocca map the top of the tongue, the space in between.

It is rich on the palate; I become aware of my own palate: the roof of my mouth. The wine reaches out to the boundaries of the mouth and still as I write I feel my gums pulsating (but not unpleasantly) as though rising up to meet the wine.

As I leave, I see a sign for St. Bride's, the Cathedral of Fleet Street, where Rupert Murdoch and Jerry Hall married in 2016. It takes up a lot of space; it is much shorter and wider than it appears from the street. It is plainer than I imaged. There is a stained-glass representation of Christ with the mitre in his hand. The windows are leaded, but in clear rather than stained glass, so the church is bright. There's a woman sitting quietly at the front. Six lit candles sit on the steps at the foot of the altar, and two others on the floor. It's difficult to see which is raised on the step and which is a reflection.

As I stand up to leave, the candles have been blown out; smoke swirls up through the church.

I wait in the evening sun for the bus heading towards St Paul. Ludgate Hill, Old Bailey, announces a recorded voice. The bus lurches forward suddenly. I see trees inside the glass visitor centre opposite the Cathedral, then realise they are outside, but reflected off the glass.

I check my face in the bus window to make sure there are no wine stains. People are filing out of offices. As the bus heads towards Bank, my mouth feels like it's too big

for my face, expanding and contracting, pulsating. My gums are on the march as I watch the City spill out onto the streets.

\*

I cross London Bridge, passing the dragon that marks the boundary, a mythical animal in silver paint, its wings painted red. It holds a shield bearing the coat of arms of the City of London. The tongue too is painted red, protruding from an open mouth, like a Maori warrior.

An enormous wooden totem stands in the foyer of New Zealand House in Haymarket. There are images of the All Blacks on the doors of the lifts, as though they are stepping forward into the Haka. The lift will take you almost as far as the penthouse on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor, but you have to walk up the last flight of stairs. You can see all of London from up here; the Houses of Parliament, Leicester Square, the City receding in the distance.

We are tasting the new vintage from Otago. I am trying to identify the sub-regions in my own mind, so I leave the list to the side and taste the wines blind. It seems as though the Gibbston Valley wines do have a certain feminine note. I am trying too to see if I can identify the biodynamic wines. Afterwards, I check the list against my own notes. I have identified Rippon (Nick Mills' biodynamic Pinot from Wanaka) my first look-Dad-no-hands moment.

\*

I pass a row of school children in red jerseys over grey trousers sitting on a wall just beyond Borough Market. They look like geraniums growing out of the wall. I cross the Millennium Bridge by St. Paul's, heading north into the City. A wind has come in; I feel as though I could lift off. Currents have formed across the surface of the water like stretch marks, as though the Thames has put on weight.

I watch Jancis Robinson in the tasting room. She writes her notes straight into a laptop, a protective layer sits over the keyboard. She has two samples in front of her.

When I do this, I write a number on the base of the glass, so I don't confuse them up.  
Left and right, they rhyme out in hot yoga class, don't mix them up.

Stands are lined around the room. Producers talk through their wines; one man says  
he has just poured out all his wines and rebottled them screwcap.

The wine classes have started to make sense; perhaps it is easier if you stop trying so  
hard. Write what you see and taste, not what you know. Sometimes it is as though  
you unscramble your eyes. Tasting seems to lie somewhere between objective and  
subjective. Sometimes it seems closer to poetry than prose.

We congregate at the spittoon like boarders queueing for the sink. You see the  
occasional person with a paper cup from a coffee shop, so they can avoid the  
scramble, and that image comes back to me when I see a homeless person stretch out  
a cup.

Often I have a silk scarf around my neck; I have to pull it to the side leaning over the  
spittoon. I think of work experience students in the office, their ties dangling  
dangerously over shredders. I think of one girl who came into my office to confess  
she had just shredded one of my original files, her face the colour of paper.

I think of the wine waiter pouring at the table, waiting as you taste the wine. You are  
testing it really, to check it is clean, without flaw, rather than making any  
pronouncement.

Often, the wines are beyond reach; we are tasting wines we cannot afford to purchase  
ourselves. Sometimes I wonder who we are tasting for. A friend publishes a poetry  
collection, *Soho*, which he describes as a psychogeographical tour of queer history. I  
think of peep shows, of look but don't touch, as we taste, but don't drink.

I think of all of us, court jesters or royal tasters, tasting (but not eating) to confirm  
the food is safe. We keep on, courtiers, in a continuous dance, swirling around the  
spittoon, an overture with no end as we bow to an invisible dance partner.

## Chapter 15

### Terroir: Tasting Place

Listen to what the wine is saying to us, says Dr. Jamie Goode, addressing the International Cool Climate Symposium in Brighton. He talks about research presented to the symposium on microbial ecology. This research into yeasts in vineyards and wineries, he says, proves a biological component to terroir. Terroir therefore extends beyond soil, to microbes, to yeast. Terroir extends above and below. I think of my master's definition of an apartment as a cube of air.

I have heard discussions before on harvesting natural yeast, what to do if the juice refuses to ferment naturally. I have heard an Australian producer asked if he was ever tempted to use inoculated yeast. One year, he said they were very tempted when they had a stuck ferment (it sounds like the decision whether to intervene to induce labour.) He said their wines ferment spontaneously around Easter, no matter when Easter falls.

Dominic Buckwell, a barrister, addresses a group on Legal Designations of land both within and beyond the EU. He is introduced as 'legal by day, wine by candlelight' and member of the Court of Master Sommeliers. He cites the OIV (International Organisation of Vine and Wine) definition of terroir:

a concept that refers to an area where the collective knowledge amassed from, on the one hand, the interactions between the identifiable physical and biological environment, and on the other hand, applied vitivinicultural practices, imparts distinctive characteristics on the products originating from that area.

Sussex is applying for Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status, under EU Regulation, available for products with 'qualities and characteristics essentially or exclusively due to a particular geographical environment with its inherent natural and human factors'. The Brexit referendum is weeks away. Some delegates offer the



‘rising tide raises all boats’ argument that they should promote England as a wine region before carving up the map, confusing consumers. No one, it is argued, is going to ask for a glass of Sussex.

\*

Dr. Wendy Parr from Lincoln University, New Zealand, addresses the question of minerality and the links with terroir. It is, she says, unlikely that we are tasting directly the vineyard rocks and soil. This proposition has been destroyed by geologists, but what are we tasting? What are we perceiving that we want to call mineral? What in wine evokes geological metaphors via associative memory? Can it (minerality) be smelled, or is it a palate sensation? The French, she says, rely more on their noses. Is there a consensus across cultures? What is in your head already, she asks. Can it be smelled, or is it a palate memory?

I think again of Auden’s *Tell me the Truth about Love*. Again, I find myself writing *Is it usually sick on a swing?* I head outside, to Brighton’s bracing air. The old pier sits adrift, like a dilapidated lobster pot. An EU flag is waving in the wind. I walk along the seafront. The whole business is becoming very complicated. An advertisement is nailed into the wall, depicting different flavours of ice cream layered one on top of the next. Is this terroir? I wonder.

\*

Ronald Blythe, the East Anglian nature writer asked ‘When do we begin to look? Or does the landscape enter the bloodstream with the milk?’ The issue with tasting, I think, is that it is acquired knowledge. With the possible exception of the French, who I suspect have this knowledge at birth, the rest of us have to learn it.

When we calibrated our palates for the WSET Diploma, our Wine Lexicon listed descriptors from floral/fruit notes to oak/other. Mineral was listed under oak/other, encompassing aromas from earth, petrol, kerosene, rubber and tar to smoke, ‘stony/steely’ and wet wool. Some in the class compared minerality to licking a stone, but I didn’t take it this far. We talked about flint and slate, the crustaceans in

the bedrock at Chablis. Minerality evokes a clean, lean flavour; I think of wet rock, clean, just rained on. It stands apart from mulchy descriptors of barnyard, forest floor or mushroom, of something that is growing.

Jamie Goode's *I Taste Red* is published. It includes the WSET Diploma Wine Lexicon. It has been revised since I sat the exams. Mineral is now absent from the list. What were we tasting when we thought we were tasting minerality?

On the business of writing, Goode quotes Hugh Johnson on Robert Parker:

His secret is the energy and commitment, the sheer joy in wine and lust for life, that make his words flow and create conversation... By the 1990s, the air was thick with fruit and nuts.

Johnson considers Jancis Robinson to have a more cerebral viewpoint than Parker, he writes, 'She generally eschews the fruit-salad school in her crisp analysis,' he says, 'You sometimes feel she is marking exam papers.'

Goode quotes Johnson himself, on the writing of tasting:

We can discern many stylistic shifts in recent years. The first was an invasion of similes to supplement a limited supply of adjectives. Wines are no longer delicate or fine, but 'like' lemons or nettles, or indeed boysenberries or loganberries... And above all, the minerality. Who launched this elusive (but now apparently universal) quality and descriptor? Such a thing certainly exists in wine, but nine times out of ten the writer simply means acidity, and might have said so.

Minerality is a useful descriptor, I think. It's both conceptual and specific; it brings an image of rock or stone to mind. We would use it to describe, I think, a structural component, a tension in the wine, a linear quality; sometimes, but not exclusively, a light body. Some people say they use it to denote a certain level of acidity, but I have heard someone say they think of it as alkaline. Are we all tasting something different?

Jancis Robinson writing in the *Financial Times*, in a column headed, *Don't Use the M word*, considers a lecture Alex Maltman, an academic geologist, gave to the Institute of Masters of Wine. Maltman claims that there is no causal connection between the bedrock beneath the vines and the taste in the glass.

I order a copy of Maltman's textbook, *Vineyards, Rocks and Soils: The Wine Lover's Guide to Geology*. Maltman is not, he says, denying the existence, or the importance of terroir. I see his arguments on minerality as a form of separating wine from place.

I become tangled up in a Jesuitical argument. One descriptor, perhaps, will not change the landscape, but removing the causal connection between glass and bedrock I find unsettling, as though the land is giving way, leaving us to gain a footing in nothing more stable than metaphor. What is minerality? Is it a memory? Does terroir still exist? I fear I have been gaining fluency in a new language to discover it is Latin.

Terroir, I see as a form of recognition, or authority; a way of looking at the world. Of working out what works where and why. If you remove this has the tablecloth been whipped away, removing the glasses too, revealing not a table, but a plank of chipboard propped up on trellises, with a few stains which cannot be distinguished one from the next?

Meanwhile, wine has existed since God's time. Stephen Skelton's *Viticulture*, says:

Vines – members of the genus *Vitis* – are, in their natural habitat, woodland plants that climb and clamber up convenient trees to branches, searching for the light. Their only aim is to produce grapes sweet enough to attract the birds, who then distribute the seeds which fall to the ground where they eventually germinate. In this way, the future of the vine is assured.

The discourse is whirling around me. Maybe none of this matters. Maybe place knows what it knows, maybe place remembers what it needs to; maybe I don't need to know how or why place knows what it knows. I think of our lecturer Gareth's

advice about the unknown knowns. I want to disengage the brain. I want to let the known knowns and the unknown unknowns talk to each other.

One night as the bus crosses London Bridge the clouds are a wash of watercolours, from grey to duck egg blue. They look chalky, the descriptor we learned for tannins when they are slightly under-ripe. I think of the layers of ice cream on the seafront at Brighton. It feels for a moment that I could reach out and lick the sky.

## Chapter 16

### Non Union

My mother says she remembers a late summer the year I was born. She remembers sunbathing in the garden well into September. This summer I am lying beside her. My father takes a photograph from the side to show our legs stretched out. I have broken my right ankle; my mother has fractured her right kneecap; our fractures balance each other out. At dinner, we sit with alternate limbs elevated to the side as though arranging elaborate dresses around us. My mother is uncomplaining, stoical, and in this too we balance each other out.

I can't put any weight on the foot. My study chair served as a wheelchair in London but I was terrified of tumbling headfirst down the steep stairs of my apartment. You're in shock, you'd better come home, my sister said. It was an adventure waiting in the plane at Belfast City airport while they elevated a metal platform to receive the wheelchair.

The surgeon diagnoses an undisplaced fracture of the fibula. It will take six weeks to unite; I will not need surgery. I cancel a trip to meet Alan Brady in France.

\*

I lie in my single bed, watching the curtains backlit by sunshine. I can see a line of women in the pleats across the top. Some are expectant mothers, the pleat of the curtains gathered in at the top of their bump. Others are African ladies in elaborate headdress.

I remember racing into my parents' bedroom as a young child to tell them there were little men living in my curtains. Come and see, I insisted, dragging my father along, but when we got there the men had disappeared and I had nothing to show him.

I amass a collection of xrays. The fracture is not uniting properly. The latest image looks like a bone that has been hauled out of the bin. I can see the gap between the two sections of bone, where a dog might sink his incisor.

\*

I accompany my father to the voting booth. I hear someone saying, I hope we get out. I live in heartland of the DUP. Almost overnight boundaries and allegiances reconfigure. Having canvassed for a Leave vote, Ian Paisley, MP, advises his constituents to apply for Irish passports.

My father relays between my mother and me; he tears up and down the stairs, racing between bathrooms with a white plastic stool so we can each sit down in the shower.

My collection of xrays grows. The gap between the two sections of bone is closing, but if they don't meet it will result in non union. In my mind Brexit and the fractured fibula begin to fuse.

Time stretches ahead, slowly.

One afternoon my mother reaches me a needle and asks if I can thread it. It is a production for either of us to have to set out in search of glasses. Suddenly, I have a memory of seeing her mother reaching the needle to her, saying, can you thread that for me? I think of each generation lost in concentration, their eyes still strong enough to find the way through the eye of the needle.

\*

My writing has come to a halt.

I sit surrounded by textbooks. I read tasting notes: short, truncated sentences that rise and fall with the cadence of the shipping forecast. I think, too of my first piano teacher, Betty who could read the future in the tea leaves.

As soon as I was old enough to read, I had gone to Betty's house next door for piano lessons. I can't remember what she looked like, and though she can't have been much older than mid-fifties, she speaks (in my memory) like a kind of Miss Marple.

Betty had met her mother's ghost on the stairs before they'd known she was ill. She knew the moment her sister's fiancé was killed during the war. Don't talk about him anymore, she'd said when her sister told her about the nylon stockings he'd promised to bring. Don't talk about him, he's not coming back, she said, and a week later they received the telegram. Betty had seen the plane falling in the teacup.

The Steinway baby grand sat at the back of the drawing room. It had a beautiful, deep tone, but that piano knew I hadn't practised as my fingers grappled for the keys. Betty would sit at the edge of her armchair, the smell of coffee rising from the teacup in her hand, a piece of my mother's shortbread in the saucer. By the time we had made it as far as Molière and Maupassant in school I still couldn't sight read, and when we came to a new piece I'd ask her to play it first, as if it was an audition. After I'd finished playing, she'd set down the cup, lift a pencil from the edge of the keys, and mark up the music sheet. In my memory there is something of the sacrament about the ritual of those afternoons, the shortbread, the silence, the short musical refrains, the call and response.

Some time ago I started playing again. I would book a slot at the Barbican Centre and bring my headphones. It was more like practising than playing, but there was something meditative about the repetitive motion.

My teacher, Amelia, was Russian and her voice had the cadence of music. *Yes*, but not so *boring*, she would say. I had forced myself to sight read. There was a kind of scholarly satisfaction to reading the notes marked against the five lines of the music, but I could see grammar instead of language and when I played it sounded like I was proof reading.

As I read Amelia's notes the quavers look like exclamation marks. 'Don't force them,' she wrote, 'but fade away'. I could hear her Russian accent as I read. 'LH should be light, short (independent),' she wrote, 'play LH detached'. She wrote

‘RISK’ then ‘Empahsize E’. There’s an explanation of a grace note, which seems to be an invisible note; something about an absence or a presence. The entry continues, perhaps as an encouragement, ‘RH plays all notes short – feel like one of the rock band (cool).’

As I read the notes they feel like coded messages, as though I’m translating from another language. She has marked 8 X as if she’s signing off with a kiss and it reads like ‘Rx’ the reference for treatment prescribed, which I’d read in medicolegal cases. Then she writes ‘hold LH, pedal exercises’ and by this stage this whole business reminds me of learning to drive, keeping your back straight, your foot within easy reach of the brake, constantly checking the mirror.

\*

Betty’s house has come on the market. Go on through, says the estate agent as he grapples with the keys and bends down to lift the fliers and two-for-one pizza offers.

Coloured light streams through the stained glass windows on the return.

My mother and I head straight for the drawing room. The marble fireplace is still there, but the gilt mirror has gone, and the room seems so ordinary without it. The walls look so much smaller without her oil paintings. The room looks nothing like itself. There’s an artificial Christmas tree perched on top of cardboard boxes where the piano used to stand.

I used to sit in this room as a child, listening to Betty talking to my mother. Of course that was a *disastrous* marriage, she’d say quietly, a *most* unsuitable alliance. There was a world of possibility in the white spaces of those stories.

I can see Betty looking into the tea leaves. She’s wearing thick woollen purple tights with a tweed skirt. Pip and Bobo, her Yorkshire Terriers sit at her feet. We’re on the low sofas beside the fireplace. What can you see? I ask her, but the leaves aren’t clear.



Betty had been offered a place at the Conservatoire de Paris, but war broke out in 1939 and she stayed in Ireland. Her husband Sam was as plain speaking as she was polished. He would say (a pronounced glottal stop turning Betty into *bay-aaay*), There's Betty ma wife, Betty ma sister, Betty ma sicitary, A'm up to ma arse in Bettys. When he bought the house next to my parents, he said he'd put a face at every window, but they never had children. Sam, Darling, you'll drop it, Betty would say when she'd find him next door, a cigar and a whiskey in his hand, and me, six months old, on his knee.

Lay your flowers on the path of life, and not on the grave, Betty used say, but after she died I'd taken to cycling out to Broughshane, the village where Sam had grown up, the village that lay at the foot of Slemish, where St Patrick was said to have tended the sheep. I'd park the bike across from the nursery school and walk through the graveyard. I'd stand at Sam's family plot and think of Betty. A few years later my mother and I called in, on our way to the coast, to say a prayer. I followed her across the graveyard; I'd been standing at the wrong grave.

My mother and I go on through to the kitchen, past the table where Betty's oil paintings used to dry. We continue out to the garden, past the black stone wall that bordered our garden, past the headstones erected for Pip and Bobo, and we remember the day she buried Pip (or was it Bobo?). She was so convinced the dog had stirred that she had to call the vet to confirm he was dead. We keep going right down to the end, where my sister and I used to play: the secret garden. It is dangerous underfoot, a bit like a graveyard where the ground gives way. Be careful, my mother says.

\*

The ankle specialist is considering surgery. We need to wait to see if the fracture will unite, but in the meantime, I can go back to London. I like how you feel invisible when you travel, but in a wheelchair you are invisible. We wait in a holding pen. When we look at the others waiting to be transported onto the plane it is not a cheerful sight. My sister says there is a lot to be said for Switzerland. Someone wearing a brightly-coloured bib checks his clipboard and takes the handles of the

wheelchair. He looks like he should still be at school. He sets off like an apprentice gardener sent out to fetch a wheelbarrow. My sister races behind us, saying, her *name* is *Judy*.

The city looks different when you travel above ground; I begin to piece places together. You get in, I take the sticks, says the Uber driver. The app gives you the registration number but not the colour of the car. I climb in beside strangers, wondering if might end up abducted and sold into slavery, if my face might end up on side of milk carton.

I return home for review with the surgeon. At London City airport the man who pushes the chair shoves my carry-on case between my feet as though my legs too are suitcases; I am part of the cargo. Instead of a wheelchair they show me something between a shovel and a sledge that is hauled up the steps of the propeller plane and I say I will walk.

I am scheduled to travel to Switzerland with the Circle of Wine Writers, a guild based in London. The Circle hosts tastings and trips and membership gives you a press pass. This is to be my first trip with the Circle. The orthopaedic surgeon says I can go; he will decide if he needs to operate when I return.

## Chapter 17

### Switzerland

We gather in Geneva airport, the Circle of Wine Writers, recently arrived from Yorkshire to New York.

Lakes slip past the bus window ignored in conversation. We stop at Château de Châtagneréaz (château of the chestnuts) in the Canton de Vaud. We look upwards as if admiring frescos; we read signatures flamed by candlelight. Our host added his name to this ceiling in 2001; his great-grandfather had signed it in 1864. Vines have grown here since 996.

Over lunch we drink wines with names that read like spelling mistakes. We drank Chablais (not Chablis) and Savagnin (not Sauvignon) Blanc. Swiss wines, according to Jancis's *Oxford Companion of Wine*, tend to be light, white and relatively neutral. Chasselas is the principal grape variety, said the potential to express the country's diversity of soils and climates.

We hear how the wines of the Vaud express their terroirs in floral notes. In Lavaux, the vines were grown on steep slopes planted in terraces on clay-sandstone, marne or schist. Lavaux was registered as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2007. Cistercian monks planted the vines.

We hear the soil of Chablais is mainly rocky – a gigantic landslide covered Yvorne in 1584 – and limestone, giving the wines a mineral nature, with notes of flint.

We drink wines from the Côtes de l'Orbe, with gorges and soils of limestone, sandstone and clay, said to produce velvety rich red wines, from Pinot and Gamay to the Swiss varieties Garanoir and Gamaret.

The turquoise, glacial waters of the Rhône rush by below as we continue on eastwards to the town of Sierre. We gather in an upper room at the Château de Ville

where winemakers speak in tongues. I listen as sentences slip between French and English; a hand-held fan keeps time like a metronome.

We sit on long benches outside, the steep vineyards wrapped around us. After an aperitif of Petite Arvine, a native grape of Valais, the rich, savoury smell of Raclette du Valais rises from the grill. As each plate arrives, we lift a potato somewhere between a marble and a table tennis ball and add a tiny pickled onion. We drink Fendant which had been called Chasselas over lunch in Vaud; this evening in the Valais it is Fendant. At lunch in Vaud we drank Savagnin Blanc; here it is Heida.

Someone points to a map, indicating the provenance of the herd as each wave of plates arrives. *Les Haudères*, we hear, is made from the milk of ‘fighting cows’. We hear how unpasteurized milk allows each cheese to retain its individual taste. The minerality and slight saltiness of the whites works off the richness of the cheese. The portions look innocent, but one by one, we decline with regret.

We make our way up the hill for Château Mercier. Once a convent, it stands over the town built in tufa rock. I retreat into a tiny elevator with its own wooden banquette which lies somewhere between a waiting room and a confessional.

Two single beds sit at opposite corners of an enormous room. I pull on ropes which bring heavy wooden shutters crashing down, closing out the vineyards.

We are rostered for an early morning session in Château Mercier’s swimming pool, recently renovated as a tasting room. Switzerland, we hear, is looking towards export. Entry level wine is difficult because of high land costs, topography (steep vineyards are hard to farm) and high labour costs. In the wake of the Brexit vote one of the writers talks about the purchasing power of the British peso. The Valais is described as the California of Switzerland, with a microclimate of low rainfall, sunshine and *le foehn*, a wind that warms the valley like a hair drier.

Jancis’s Oxford Companion says Switzerland struggles with subsidence and soil erosion; the slope of some vineyards is as steep as 90 %. There are vineyards

propped up precariously around us. We pass a vineyard in a V formation which looks like the Flat Iron building at altitude.

We are bundled from buses into 4 x 4 jeeps and when we arrive at Val d'Herens, Pinot Noir vines are clinging to the hillside. This, we hear is the vineyard closest to the Matterhorn. I descend slowly; I hardly notice the vines lined up like privet box hedges across the slope. Glacial moraine and loose schist slips underfoot. One of the writers takes off his shoes, declaring himself shit scared of schist. Another writer, a South American, grips a pipe between his teeth, a third grips the pole that holds his camera, a shepherd with a staff.

We are slipping too between languages: the labels are written in French and German. I read that the vines are between 650 – 800 metres altitude. We are drinking Clos de la Couta, Heida de Vex, 2014. The back label reads Heida, Païen, Savagnin Blanc, as though the wine is a blend, except that these are three names for the same grape.

The lift in Château Mercier, little bigger than a dumb waiter, opens by the kitchen. It is almost as fast to take the stone staircase, but there is something meditative about sitting on the banquette. Sculptures stand around the château like silent saints. There is a billiards room upstairs which looks like somewhere peace talks might have taken place.

\*

The Alps are almost ignored in the school trip excitement of the bus. We climb into a cable car that dangles over a dam in the Val d'Anniviers; we see a church as small as a doll's house in the distance. We watch barrels ageing at altitude in a cold dark cave which might be the highest wine cellar in the continent. We taste these wines, Les Titans, Defi Blanc, and Defi Noir, at 1500 metres altitude. The winemaker has access to these wines for only a few months in the year – within three weeks of our descent the area will be accessible only by air.

\*

Round tables have been set across the stone floor of the château. Looking down on the place settings from the stone staircase I feel as though I am watching someone sit in front of the mirror, preparing themselves for the evening. The cutlery is laid out like a choker necklace, the small circles of the wine glasses like pearl earrings.

The musicians are practising quietly, a bow moves back and forth across violin strings. There are roses at the centre of each table. A chair sits further back than the others, as though an invisible guest has risen from the table to ask for the first dance.

At dinner, each wine is paired with music and we sit, unwilling to disturb the mood by lifting our cutlery, and later, as I watch from the landing, it is as though the Georgian jupe tables themselves are dancing, as though the tables are rising to meet Vivaldi, Beethoven, Bach and Bloch, lifting their jupe skirts, swirling like dervishes over Persian rugs.

\*

The face of the Swiss clock at station marks almost 9 a.m. as we board a red Matterhorn Gotthard Bahn. Someone says, *Gut fahrt*, have a good journey. We see vivid green slopes with irrigation hoses like waterfalls. We take our bearing from the maps laminated into the tables. We board a smaller train, the Glacier Express, then a bright yellow bus with glass roof and a musical horn that sounds each time we turn a corner. I miss the Matterhorn, but it might have been pointed out under another name.

Alphorn players line up like Olympic oarsmen, heralding our arrival into Ticino. The horns stand taller than the men themselves who look like golfers holding giant clubs, ready to tee off in the direction of the Alps. A sommelier is wearing a black apron and pouring white Merlot. He offers a tray of cheeses, little paper flags announcing their names as his hair waves in the wind. The players hold the huge alphorns in their right hand, and as we depart they stand like surfers lined up against the bright yellow bus.

We press ahead on into Ticino, where we pass vines trained overhead on pergolas. At Lugano the curved balconies cast shadows across the Hotel Splendide. We continue on through tastings. There are circles of salamis and layers of lardo laid out like Spanish flags. We taste Merlot in various hues, with and without age.

Chestnuts have started to fall around the lake. There are boats waiting off jetties framed by trees. An elderly man looks out into the water and when he talks to his carer his voice has the rich rasping tones of the Godfather.

Room service have laid out a silk blouse on the bed, gathered at the middle like a bow tie.

Out on the lake, a wash has formed behind our party in the shape of a wine glass. A Swiss flag waves from the boat. We pass a Casino on the waterfront; we are in Italian waters. Villages flow down to the lake; slender trees stretch upwards and down into the water so we see them in duplicate. The sign at the jetty reads Paradiso.

A nightdress has been laid out on my bed like a fan. Two white mats have been laid out in the bathroom, a third bathmat paves the way towards the bed. Here too, my make-up brushes have been lined up on a white cloth, laid out like instruments, a reminder that I need to write.

There is no border check as we make our way to the airport at Milan. I see the Alps, the Italian flag, the European flag. I think of the writers gathered from South Africa to Wales and introduced as the wine press from London. I think of our hosts, ever gracious, saying, I am at your disposal. When I send a short email on my return with the aid of a French dictionary, I receive a response in English that ends, PS. I have heard you are Irish. And I want to tell you that I love Ireland. I visited Cobh, Cork, where the migrants started for the USA.

I think of us swimming in Lake Lugano. I think of us tasting in the decommissioned swimming pool at the deconsecrated convent. I think of us squashed together into a corner of the town square in Sierre as the others danced. I think of the Château de

Châtagneréaz where you had to work as a cooper to earn the right to flame your name onto the cellar. Surely this too is terroir.

I think of the pin worn on the lapels of the sommeliers. I think of the small Pioneer pin worn by old men at the back of the church at home, a symbol of their pledge of abstinence. Both pins, perhaps a route to the sublime, through or around alcohol, a way to the same place.



## Switzerland, September Sixteen

*i.m. Elisabeth Pasquier*

You will remember how The Circle  
of Wine Writers had come as far as China, Como,  
the Camino to gather in an upper room where winemakers spoke

in tongues; you will remember struggling to keep up with sentences that stretched  
across three languages; you will remember how a wine  
might be Heida in the morning

and Savagnin Blanc by night,  
how Chasselas could become Fendant; you will remember schist  
slipping underfoot on the vineyard in Val d'Herens;

you will remember the Alps racing past the bus window, the Rhône  
rushing by below; you will remember a cable car dangling  
over a dam;

you will remember barrel ageing  
at altitude; you will remember switchbacks  
that would soon be snowlogged; you will remember tasting wines lined up in V  
formations;

you will remember reading the signatures  
of cellarhands flamed onto the ceiling  
at the Château de Châtagneréaz

(where chestnuts grew) in the Canton de Vaud;  
you will remember alphorns heralding your arrival  
into Ticino, the horn players lined up like Olympic oarsmen;

you will remember sommeliers in black aprons  
pouring white Merlot; you will remember waking surrounded by vines  
in a château that was once a convent where the walls were made from tufa

with honeycomb holes you could put  
your hand in; you will remember the tables  
being set for dinner: cutlery laid out like choker necklaces, you will remember

the tables  
rising to meet Vivaldi, Beethoven, Bach and Bloch;  
you will remember the jupe tables swirling: their skirts fanned out like whirling  
dervishes;

you will remember chestnuts  
falling by Lake Lugano; you will remember  
sitting in squares, tasting in triangles, writing in circles.

## Chapter 18

### Reclaimed Land

The ankle fracture has united, eventually, but the surgeon decides to shorten the ligaments to improve the stability of the joint. I haven't had surgery since childhood. It seems a very jolly business; there are felt tip markers drawn onto your skin and large primary one style paper pants that look like hair nets. Everyone is kind. I lie in recovery watching other patients emerge from the anaesthetic. A nurse asks me if she can do anything to make me more comfortable, and it feels as though I have my own gentleman's personal gentleman.

\*

I start exercising in the pool where I learned to swim as a child. The physiotherapist has taught me how to stretch out the ankle to regain strength. I start pilates classes with the physiotherapist, but the right shoulder won't elevate. I had been attending physio in London for a suspected frozen shoulder. When I interviewed anyone, the shoulder didn't want to stretch across the A4 page, so I wrote short lines, as though it was poetry.

The physiotherapist had been trying to teach me how to engage the muscles correctly, but I couldn't visualise what was happening. She told me how to engage the shoulder blade but I couldn't feel any difference. I felt as though I had no control over the area. I had gained weight (which I didn't want to acknowledge) and I thought of the area around my shoulders as separate from the rest of my body. I thought of it as reclaimed land over which I had no authority or interest.

I see a shoulder specialist in Belfast. I am pushed like a pizza on a paddle into a wood fired oven; the MRI tunnel makes stuttering thumping noises like men drilling into tarmac.

Surgery is scheduled for repair of a large tear in the right rotator cuff as soon as I am weaned off crutches. I take photographs of the temporary tattoos, arrows like anchors across a sailor's arm, confirming the correct site of surgery. There is a Zimmer frame around the toilet. It feels like I have been catapulted into old age.

The surgeon sits at the end of my bed, in blue scrubs, and says, I will personally ensure that you are taken care of while you are in theatre. Even though I spent over a decade advising doctors on patient communication I am so touched I feel I might cry. In recovery I look at the other patients regain consciousness and the anaesthesia strikes me as a kind of death. I watch a girl cry out for her sister. I start to shiver, and a silver electric blanket is wrapped around me. I feel as though I have been pulled out from a collapsing building.

For weeks I sleep propped on a stack of pillows, my right shoulder held in a right angle. As I read about sensory appreciation in wine I am thinking of my own proprioception, the body's sensory awareness. I need to do the recovery exercises as new sensory pathways are connected.

The shoulder surgeon always addresses me as Miss O'Kane. As he discharges me from his care he says, Miss O'Kane, I sincerely hope this is the end of your orthopaedic odyssey.

\*

When I return to London, I am afraid of the Underground. I used to take both crutches in one hand as if I was climbing onto a ski lift. In Westminster station, a suitcase had tumbled down the escalator, almost hitting me. Now, even without the crutches, I feel my pulse elevated, my palms clammy. When I ask the physiotherapist if I will return to normal she says yes, but I will have to work to get it back. She says the muscles need to form new pathways. I have exercise plans to stretch muscles from ankle to shoulder. Therabands in various colours are strung like flags around my apartment.

I meet up with a friend from Ballymaloe and we stride across Hampstead Heath. I take out a Boris bike in search of wild garlic. I swim in Soho, in an ex council marble pool with a glass roof. I start to map out new sections of the city. I head out to Charlton Lido on overland train. I find a Turkish grocer's shop on the way and I leave with recipes sketched like directions on a brown paper bag.

I push out further toward the edges. At Parliament Hill Lido the wetsuits everyone else is wearing make sense the second my body is submerged. Every nerve is alive. I hardly know where my body ends and the water begins. I hardly know whether I am Mohammed or the mountain.

\*

Horses are standing to attention outside Borough Market. The Bishop of Southwark is reciting Auden over loudspeakers from the Cathedral. The street is lined with policemen in white cotton gloves to honour PC Keith Palmer in the wake of the attack at Westminster Bridge.

A few months later I am reading at a festival in Ireland. My phone keeps buzzing with messages asking if I'm safe. Half asleep, I imagine an attack has happened here, but it seems strange that Listowel Writers Week in County Kerry would be a target. I go online and read about the London Bridge attack, about the casualties on the bridge and in Borough Market. This is my market; this is where I shop, where I socialise. It could have been my hair pulled back, my throat slit.

I fly back, afraid. The Tube doesn't stop at London Bridge. The station looks like an abandoned city. Above ground, the streets are deserted.

I pass the church leaders as they process up to County Hall and I stand over floral tributes that lie by the mythical dragon creature intended to protect the City boundaries. I read messages of support stuck onto Post-its. A camera man asks me to step aside.

If an ice cream van drives past, I wonder if it is really an ice cream van. If someone comes up behind me, I jump. There are floral corsages tied to scaffolding. Borough Market itself is boarded up for over a week. When I see the hoarding I think of a burns patient, their face bandaged up. Place itself is wounded.

## Chapter 19

### Rioja

I always imagine heat when I think of Rioja, but only Switzerland has greater average height above sea level than Spain. The air is fresh; it feels almost like a ski resort. The windscreen wipers stretch slowly up and across the bus window. The gears struggle to gain altitude beyond Bilbao as we climb closer to the clouds, wrapped in a blanket of mist.

Rioja runs along the River Ebro. There was an influx of winemakers from Bordeaux at the time of phylloxera in the late nineteenth century. Wineries were built around the Haro and wine left the town on the newly constructed railway that ran along the Ebro Valley.

\*

We descend deep into cellars where barrels are stacked up on rollers and stretch as far as you can see. A rich ripe round smell, coconut and vanilla, and caramel, toffee and mocca hangs in the air, a smell you could almost bite. The light is different in the cellar, like a sepia portrait.

We have come to celebrate 75 years of Viña Ardanza, a wine first made by our hosts, La Rioja Alta, in 1942. A vintage is not declared every year; Ardanza (like vintage Port) is only made on years where the fruit justifies it. La Rioja Alta keeps tens of thousands of barrels in cellars. American oak, traditionally the hallmark of Rioja, is imported and cured outside for two years. There are walls lined with tools that coax wood to bend backwards into barrels.

Gran Reserva 890, the year La Rioja Alta began, spends six years in American oak casks and at least six more in bottle before it is released, almost as long as first and second level education. The Gran Reserva 904 spends four years in American oak casks and at least four more years in bottle before it is released. Viña Ardanza

Reserva is Tempranillo, barrel-aged for three years in American oak casks and Garnacha for thirty months, then two more years in bottle before it is released. The costs of cellaring must resemble school fees.

The barrels are racked (emptied from one barrel into another) every six months. As we pass, someone is sitting on a high wooden stool, racking by candlelight. Our hosts tell us that electricity was invented (or discovered) here in Haro. Someone runs what looks like a pick axe along two wires overhead producing sparks of light. We watch those first sparks of electric light; we watch cellar workers racking by candlelight. We stand in this subterranean land that smells of alchemy, somewhere between past and future.

\*

We head to Rioja Baja; wind blows cold across our faces. Ripe bunches hang low over the stony ground; the grapes are a deep blue or purple, they taste sweeter than I expected. This is termed a 'cool' area, with diurnal variation in temperature which will bring a freshness to the fruit. There are boulders lying between the vines that retain the heat. The winemaker says the Garnacha grapes here grow 'between two suns'. In Spanish, *sol* is both sun and ground. *Sol* is above and below; we are standing between two terroirs.

\*

The fruit is picked at night to retain freshness. It stands overnight in refrigerated trucks to retain its acidity. On our way into the winery we stop on the platform that receives the fruit. The gatekeeper weighs in twenty-seven of us and announces a figure that comes in in tonnes.

Harvest has started. We watch as grey plastic boxes are tipped up; we watch the fruit fall into a de-stemmer. We watch the berries race past on conveyor belts like newspapers going to press.

Rioja wines are also blended from several varieties, each bringing a different quality to the wine. Someone is analysing the fruit on screen; a man in a white lab jacket pours freshly pressed juice. The first glass is pale, almost like grapefruit; the second is slightly redder, the third a deep burgundy red that looks like it might be wine already.

The darkest of three is Graciano. It grows on cool, clayey limestone soils. Our WSET lecturer, Gareth had said that Graciano could bring grace to the blend. It is used in higher end Rioja blends for finesse. It carries notes of liquorice, black cherry and plum. Gareth said it could be stunning when ripe but got its name from what the winemaker used to say if the fruit was under ripe: *Gracias, no*.

The palest of the three is Tempranillo, the predominant grape in Rioja blends. As the name suggests it ripens early. It adapts well to young wines but can give complex and velvety wines; it carries red fruit characteristics (strawberry, even tinned strawberry), cinnamon spice and Christmas cake flavours in older Rioja wines. It ages well in wood.

Garnacha is the colour of a plum. It brings body and weight to the blend with notes of black cherry, black plum, liquorice, red cherry. It needs sunshine and heat to ripen (two suns: above and below). The wines have a high alcohol content and mature early.

We descend into another cellar. I see a huge teapot on the way down and it feels as though we have strayed into the world of Lewis Carroll, as though we have found a rabbit hole into this subterranean space where the signs read DRINK ME.

\*

From the bus window I see olive trees in a matt moss green colour, trees like little squat bushes. The vines are planted north to south, patched across the hillsides, saluting the sun. We make our way below the mountains, bounded by the river Ebro, the rocky outcrops of the Basque Country as white as snowcapped peaks.



As descend into another cellar we pass a line of wine bottles bearing nameplates like trophies. They begin with Media (half), then Bordelesa (the Bordeaux style bottle), then Magnum (4.5 litres). They continue from Rehoboam-Jeroboam, to Imperial-Mathusalem to Salmanazar (9 litres). They keep growing, from Baltasar, to Nabucodonosor and beyond from Salomón to Primat, which hold 27 litres.

I wonder who are these people who drink from wine bottles that hold 27 litres. I think of Swift's *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*. I think of Gulliver journeying through Brobdingnag, so undersized in comparison to the rest of the population that the giants built him a house so small they could carry him around in it, called his 'travelling box'. I think of the decommissioned Concorde we passed on the side of the runway as we took off from Heathrow, not much bigger than a school bus.

Our hosts open outsized bottles. Rio Oja, old Spanish for Rioja, is embroidered onto the tablecloths and embossed into the bottles. We toast Ardanza's 75th birthday. Wine pours down the sides of decanters; it swills and swirls and sometime later we spill onto our travelling box, unfiltered and unfined.

## Chapter 20

### Harvest

Stephen Skelton's email tells me to take the train as far as Staplehurst Station, where Charles Dickens' train was derailed. I give the taxi driver directions that were given to me in hills and hedges and bends in the road and arrive at Hush Heath vineyard.

The sound and feel of the snipping return like a muscle memory. We are cutting Pinot; the fruit looks good – longish bunches of small dark-skinned berries. There are no *porteurs* here; a small tractor pulls up between the vines and collects the plastic containers, as though we have left out recycling boxes.

It's easier asking technical questions in English. The answers themselves have started to make more sense. It feels different, knowing I will be sleeping in my own bed tonight not a dorm. We'll run you back to the station, the harvest manager insists when we finish for the day, and she presses a jar of her own honey into my hand. We pass the Tudor-framed manor house on the way out; the estate dates back to 1503. I am back home by the evening, a jar of local honey to the good, mud still on my boots.

Two weeks later I set out with Stephen to harvest in the Surrey Hills. The Chardonnay grapes look almost luminous in the sunlight. The vineyard dips slightly in the centre like an old mattress, then rises up to meet the trees at the far end. The field is planted out too with rows of Pinot Meunier and Pinot Noir, making up three grapes in sparkling wine.

Inside, there are rows of sandwiches laid out for lunch inside. It is mid October. There are orange buckets of secateurs piled up like chocolate bars for trick or treaters. There is blood; I have cut myself in the fleshy part beneath the thumb and fingers.

Men take off their hats when the last of the fruit has come in; they look like mourners following the hearse, cap in hand, as the tractor edges past, pulling the fruit in its wake.

\*

Birds have begun to gather on my balcony, their song suggests spring rather than autumn, as though the seasons are unclear whether time should go backwards or forwards.

I sit outside in the sun. I am reading the Bordeaux 2016 vintage reports printed from Jancis' website. The reports read like individual dramas that run parallel to our own interior world. I have printed out Jancis' tasting notes from St Estèphe and Pauillac. I remember returning from the '09 harvest and enrolling for French conversation classes, when the teacher said I swore like a soldier.

There are suggested parameters between which the wine will show at its best. When I see the year 2050 and I wonder if Jancis will get to taste that year. I wonder if I will.

I read harvest reports filed by Bill Blatch, described as a veteran Bordeaux merchant. The reports read like prose poetry. There is comfort in the omniscient voice. As I read, I think of *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers, US Iraq veteran. Powers portrays war as an animate force, advancing across the land:

The war tried to kill us in the spring. As grass greened the plains of Nineveh and the weather warmed, we patrolled the low-slung hills beyond the cities and towns. We moved over them and through the tall grass on faith, kneading paths into the windswept growth like pioneers.

As I read Powers I think of nature, the struggle for survival:

The war would take what it could get. It was patient. It didn't care about objectives, or boundaries, whether you were loved by many or not at all.

While I slept that summer, the war came to me in my dreams and showed me its sole purpose: to go on, only to go on.

I read Blatch's report as some kind of coded message; even his name, Bletchley, suggests war. As I read his vintage report, I think of the struggle for survival:

In Bordeaux, the thermometer went (very slightly) below zero only seven times in the whole season. May was as chaotic as April...the swings were more violent.

I think of place as an animate force. Blatch writes:

The beaches...were invaded by the Bordelais...Nobody could know it at the time but we were embarking on a four-month period of absolute drought that would continue virtually unabated right through the harvest.

I think of the voice of place itself.

There is comfort in reading these harvest reports after the fact, weather forecasts in reverse. It is only in retrospect that they make sense. It is only after the fact that the harvest assumes a voice. I think of the shipping forecast, the voice of geography.

## Chapter 21

### Land Advances

I see a sign for Chartwell, Churchill's residence, from the motorway. I am shadowing Stephen again. He advises most of the vineyards in England. Vast expanses of land are being planted out, yet England is hardly virgin territory; the land was under vine centuries back, before temperatures dropped.

Today we are planting on virgin land. The field has been ploughed over in preparation for the vines; the earth lies in peaks and troughs. Strong white plastic bags lie along the side of the field, containing roots, the clone numbers marked on the outside. They look like ordinary bags of compost you might buy in the garden centre. The vine roots themselves resemble kindling; they are bundled together, long narrow twigs, one side dipped in coloured wax.

A German man named Volker is driving a huge tractor across along the field. I sit up with him in the cabin; he tells me his family have been in viticulture for generations. He drives this machine over from the Continent with his team which consists of his sister-in-law and her husband, both of whom are Polish.

The planting itself takes place behind the tractor. A red rotating wheel stretches down, reaching a root into the ground. His colleagues sit on seats which protrude out the back like fairground horses. They feed vines into a rotator that tips each vine up and prods it into the earth, wax side down.

The location of each vine is recorded by GPS Volker stops. He lights a cigarette. The satellite signal has gone down. The signal returns; we re-start.

Stephen follows on foot. Sometimes the machine drops a vine and Stephen plants it manually. I take out the phone to take a shot of him striding across the field, but the settings have altered; the photo becomes a portrait in sepia. I get down from the

cabin and follow Stephen as he walks slowly, head down. I footstep the master across the uneven land.

Heaney (I think) is here; I stumble in his hobnailed wake.

\*

The UK wine press gather in an upper room in Westminster Abbey as Pierre-Emmanuel Taittinger announces the launch of Domaine Evremond. Taittinger becomes the first Champagne house to plant in England.

The wine is to take its name from Charles de Saint-Evremond, a Frenchman, poet, epicurean and literary critic. Pierre-Emmanuel Taittinger speaks of symbols of friendship. Evremond, he says, died in England; he is buried in Poet's Corner. Reims too is a Cathedral City, he says.

Land has been purchased near Canterbury. The plots will be planted on chalk soil. The rootstock is not the same as Champagne. Soil tests have been carried out; forty-five holes have been dug already. They will wait until they understand the soil analysis; they will dig more pits. We descend into the cathedral. In Poets' Corner a bust of Evremond commemorates this Frenchman who died on English soil.

\*

Eighteen months later, we board a train at St. Pancras and disembark before the Eurotunnel. Tests for suitable terroir have continued; more land has been purchased. More holes have been dug, more soil tested. Soil analysis strikes me as an archaeology of sorts, even as the land is prepared to receive new life. Apple, pear and plum orchards have been grubbed, branches, trunks and roots burnt. Thousands of saplings have been planted out along the edges of the land as windbreaks. The plots slope to the south-east, to face the morning sun.

Each of us is given a root and a trowel. I set to work with a Chardonnay. Ian Harris, head of the WSET School, works beside me. We replace the earth into a tidy mound.

The whole business reminds me of a burial. I think of laying our first family pet to rest below the apple tree.

I think of my Scottish cousin who grew up in what we called the Persian Gulf. When they returned home to Scotland their car was caught up in a cortège. My cousin had never seen a burial. Look, Dad, he said, his face pressed up against the car window. They're planting him.

I think of my aunt's funeral in Edinburgh, the first time I looked into an open grave. We stood on cold damp ground, my eyes resting on roots that had been sliced through. I imagined the roots reconnecting after the land was filled in. I imagined sutures dissolving into skin, except these roots would stay in place, holding the remains in the earth, welcoming back the body. *Remember man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.*

I walk across the field to see where the planting proper continues. Stephen is here with Volker and his team. Volker has planted out most of the land under vine across England. This ancient looking machine is working its way across the land, with two Poles riding on the back.

It is raining. English wine producers are showing their wines at stands around the boundaries of the marquee. Taittinger Comtes '06 is flowing. I think of Pierre-Emanuel's speech in London. This is not a nationalist project, he said. He spoke of Champagne lovers as people brought up between two kisses.

He spoke of how Champagne was a land full of blood from World War I. I think of Champagne; I think of Churchill. I think of German boots advancing across English soil, Polish boots in their wake, under French orders.

In *Finders Keepers*, Seamus Heaney writes:

The word "march" was one that I used to hear again and again when I was younger...In those days, in that place, the marching season was every season because it was the land itself that did the marching. The verb meant to meet

the boundary, to be bordered by, to be matched up to and yet to be marked off from; one farm marched another farm; one field marched another field; and what divided them was the march drain or the march hedge. The word did not mean ‘walk in a military manner’, but to be close, to lie alongside, to border upon and be bordered upon...If my land marched your land, we were bound by that boundary as well as separated by it.

I think of vineyards marching, of viticultural boundaries encroaching and expanding. I think about geographical and geopolitical boundaries blurring. I think of the wines of Alsace that were labelled interchangeably in French or German. I wonder whether land has knowledge of this, whether land remembers. I wonder if land remains unchanged no matter what language is spoken by those who stand on it.

Boundaries are redrafted; new viticultural areas emerge. Borders advance and retreat like geological faults. New connections form. I think of future students of oenology examining maps superimposed on maps; the archaeology of the future.

\*

I attend a Barolo tasting in a wine club on Pall Mall. Seven producers sit at the front of the room. We learned to assess the depth of a wine’s colour by checking how much type you could read through it. The wines are pale garnet, a kind of brick colour. The words are swirling; the type bends through the glass like the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. When one of the producers stands up, the map projected across the room appears across his face; his skin takes on the contours of the vineyards.

I have been reading *Archipelago*, a journal that considers literary and artistic representations of the lands that edge and abut the seas of the British Isles and beyond. I begin to read about Norman Ackroyd, an artist whose etchings offer a stark expression of this liminal space. In his work water is often phosphorescent, land juts up almost vertically out of the sea.

Ackroyd’s work is displayed in a gallery below my apartment. He lives around the corner in a converted warehouse. When I take a break from my desk I am always



encouraged to see the light on in his studio. I see him standing over stencil plates, etching the stacks and the coastlines of the archipelago. Prints hang like laundry around the room. There is something Spartan about his existence. He rises early and starts work straight away. White overalls hang on open rails, as though he has just moved in.

I have seen photographs of him sketching on location, often on the back of a boat. I meet him in his studio; as we talk, a cigarette dangles precariously from his lips. He is a draftsman charting out this land on the edge. It is as though the images assert the existence of these remote places, Kilda and Skellig Michael. It is as though the act of sketching them brings them into creation. Often the works are filled in with a watercolour wash, but I prefer the contrasts of the black against the white page.

## Chapter 22

### Returning Home

A (willing) exile from the law I considered myself for years a neutral presence in London. As I considered terroir and identity through my writing, my reading and my tasting, I found myself drawn towards New Zealand rather than the London Irish community. I have joined the New Zealand diaspora, I wrote, emailing friends in Dunedin, after straying into a postgraduate conference at Birkbeck University. You can see me hovering over the snacks table, I said, attaching a link to the Katherine Mansfield Society website.

Twice, I attended the annual Waitangi Day celebrations. I stood in St. Lawrence Jewry, by the Guildhall in London as members of the Guild of Girdlers filed by in fur lined robes. I watched the New Zealand High Commissioner address the congregation; I watched as the Haka was performed at the reception afterwards in the Girdlers' Hall.

Twice, I ate cake celebrating Mansfield's birthday in Keynes Library on a sunny Sunday afternoon in October. There was sparkling wine. I followed the diaspora to France; I listened as the ambassador welcomed delegates to 'this tiny corner of New Zealand in Paris'. We stood on polished parquet floors and drank Marlborough Sauvignon and Otago Pinot.

In the London Review Bookshop I watched New Zealander Kirsty Gunn read from her essay, *My Katherine Mansfield Project*. Much of what was discussed was the territory of childhood, memory, and whether home is a platonic ideal. She discussed the essay, a meditation on the impossibility of returning and an attempt to negotiate that space: the illusive sense of 'home', the place that that evaporates on the point of contact. The cover of the Nottingham Edition read 'One has left a version of oneself at the place of departure and it waits for us at the point of return – but she is not me when I get there.'

As we rose from our seats the woman beside me said she had moved from New Zealand to work in publishing; she was, she said, doing a Mansfield in London. I finished my wine and the crowd dispersed and dissolved into the streets of Bloomsbury, to head towards home, wherever that might be.

Eventually, I began to attend literary events in the Irish embassy at Hyde Park Corner. I heard Dan Mulhall, Irish ambassador, read Yeats and on Yeats. I heard Eavan Boland read her poetry in the house she had grown up in; her father was the second Irish ambassador to the UK. Eventually I found myself writing emails attaching bios for publication, describing myself as an Irish writer living in London.

\*

I hadn't intended to stay for so long. I have gathered five years' worth of books and bottles. The tenant has just vacated my flat in Dublin. I know that you never step into the same river twice. I know that 'home' will have changed; that I am going back to a different life to the one I left behind and when I come back to London it too will have changed.

A while before I pack up my own things and return the keys I see a skip on the street below my bedroom window. I watch builders taking down scaffolding on the street; the bolts lie like fragments of jewellery. It looks as though place itself can be taken down like a change of scenery.

For years, I made this patch of land (or cube of air) over London Bridge my home. I passed builders in hard hats, huddled together in groups and talking in languages I couldn't place. I saw them stride out at the end of their shifts, their overalls like ski suits. I saw them stare into phones and tablets as though they were committing them to memory. Often, they just listened. They walked along, dazed, leaning into mobile phones, like children holding a shell to their ear.

I looked at the dumb waiter in the London Review Bookshop stacked full of books, as though place itself was feeding us.

I looked through the plate glass window into the restaurant kitchen at the end of the street as chefs rolled out pasta by hand, like a tourist wandering through Amsterdam.

I admired macaroons and fruit tartlets displayed on mini scaffolding like courtesans reclining on chaises longues.

I watched the erection of restaurant signs that elevated the area from *village* to *grand cru*.

\*

As I make my way home, negotiations and recriminations battle each other out. Unusually, it seems Northern Ireland might escape the worst of Brexit, but Ulster (still) says No. As debate rages over a border that could run the length of the Irish Sea, I think of Ancient History O Level, where marks were allocated for marking cities and battle sites on blank maps. The script was black and white, so you always ran the risk of planting a city in the sea.

I sit behind a young family on a flight into Dublin. The younger of the boys asks if there is a time difference. His brother scoffs and reports the question to his mother. There is a pause; I have the impression none of them is quite sure.

When I return to London Bridge an office block that stood across from the Tube station has gone. Lego men still march up and down the road; construction continues. The Shard still stands straight in mountain pose. Men hold hard hats, like riders dismounting. Men in orange vests wear new navy canvass trousers like school uniforms just out of the packets, the creases still in place.

I continue to cross the Irish Sea, but the direction of travel has reversed. Home is home again; London is away. Cranes frame the horizon from my apartment window in Dublin; as I walk around the park beneath my balcony I hear construction workers speaking in languages I cannot understand.

\*

Stephen Spurrier, MW, comes to Dublin to conduct a tasting. Spurrier was the young English wine merchant who arranged the Judgment of Paris in 1976, the blind tasting between France and California that changed the world of wine. We are tasting blind, a homage of sorts.

We sit upstairs in a newly opened wine school in Brides Glen on the outskirts of the city. I used to meet hikers here on the way to the Wicklow hills. There are rows of glasses lined up in front of us. We work in silence.

I look up from the front row and observe a kind of synchronicity, as though I am mapping the movements of the master. I think of the medical students mapping out the movements of the surgeon, the results presented in the risk management conference in Church House, Westminster.

Sunlight streams in the window: bright tasting conditions.

The Judgment of Dublin.

\*

The Heaney Home Place opens in Bellaghy, near my family home, to the north of Belfast. In Heaney I read what the land is capable of, what the land remembers:

Upend the rain stick  
and what happens next  
Is a music that you never  
would have known  
To listen for.

This, I think is my territory, my terroir.

Words have been suspended from the ceiling; the language of this place swirls on threads, like a mobile hanging over an infant's crib. Words like *turf* (peat, soft

bogland), *farl* (potato cake, only ever properly baked in N. Ireland), *throughother* (unkempt), *dandering* (wandering on foot: possibly Northern Ireland's equivalent of psychogeography).

This is the language of my childhood.

This land is my home, the land to which I will be committed.

\*

My nephew sits at the desk in my apartment as his brother sits with my brother in the rugby stadium, and Ireland play the All Blacks. He is half-watching, half-drawing. He is sketching out architectural plans. He hands me a design for my new house. He has given the largest footprint to the library; but he has allowed separate space for a study. My apartment looks a bit like a caravan, or somewhere an elderly couple have retired to, unwilling to part with their clutter. My nephew says there will be large notice boards so that I don't have to pin anything onto the walls. He has drawn out a utility room and a small gym area; he lifts the pilates balls and says they will have a room of their own.

Ireland is in the lead. I tell him I was in New Zealand when he was born. What will we be doing in another 40 years' time? I ask him. Well, he says, you'll either be 89, or dead.

\*

I sit surrounded by books and journals I don't yet completely understand on soil, geology and terroir. Textbooks are stacked up on the fireplace, arguing about minerality, about what you can taste and what you can't taste. This matters because it goes to the heart of terroir, to what the land knows.

I haven't yet secured my own position in this shifting ground. I am thinking about what literature might bring to this conversation. I have listened to Kaveh Akbar, the Iranian-American writer talk about poetry in architectural terms. Akbar says the

utility of the house is the empty space of the house; the utility of a chair is the empty space just above the chair. Perhaps terroir is no more than the structure that supports, the negative space of the wine.

I think of the lineage of these conversations in wine and in literature. I think of Heaney:

Our pioneers keep striking  
Inwards and downwards,  
Every layer they strip  
Seems camped on before.

I think too of law. In *Kid Gloves: A Voyage Around my Father*, Adam Mars Jones considers his relationship with his father, a High Court Judge. In an attempt to make sense of the system of common law, where courts are bound by precedent, he says:

A legal system based on precedent is a monument to creative rot, a sort of cultural compost heap dating back, notionally, I suppose, to the Conquest. Not everything rots down into principle at the same rate, so that the decisions of a Denning, say, can resist the process in the same way that eggshells and avocado stones do, retaining their integrity and withholding their nutrients from the rich millennial mulch of insight and vested interest.

I think of leaving one paper-based profession and entering another.

I think of layers and layers of paper decaying.

I am preparing the ground.

## Chapter 23

### Pinot Diaspora

Fields of gold flash past the window as the train heads south along the Côte d'Or. The vines are left with leaves of gold and ochre and yellow, the odd maple leaf red among them. Harvest is over.

What John Saker terms the 'Pinot diaspora' is to congregate in Beaune to celebrate a decade of the exchange programme between Central Otago and Burgundy. I have been invited to observe along with a few other members of the press. This feels like the culmination of my own research too; it feels as though the stars are about to align over the spiritual home of Pinot Noir.

I can hear the New Zealand accent on my headphones. I am listening to the recording of a masterclass on Pinot. Nick Mills is talking about Rippon, the land his grandfather began farming at Lake Wanaka. Terroir, he says, is about wine, but it is also where you choose to make your home. He is talking about *Turangawaewae*, the Maori term closest to terroir that means where you feel good, where you feel yourself at home.

We will spend the next few days tracing and re-tracing the path that runs parallel to this train track. This is hallowed land; arguably the most coveted patch of land in the world of wine. The train stops briefly at Nuits-Saint-Georges; we are almost there.

\*

Nick Mills sent the itinerary ahead. We will visit Domaine Comte G. de Vogüé, Domaine Ghislaine Bartod and Domaine Frédéric Mugnier at Chambolle-Musigny, just north of Clos Vougeot.

We will watch coopers constructing barrels at the *tonnellerie*. We will travel into the forest at Cîteaux to observe the trees that make the barrels.



The Otago winemakers will show their wines at the Hôtel Dieu, upstairs at the Hospices de Beaune.

We will celebrate in the hills above the Côte de Nuits, we will eat goat roasted outside over a fire, a *méchoi*. The directions for the woodland are written out in GPS co-ordinates.

Aubert de Villaine will host a lunch at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.

On the third day, a ceremony, will take place at the Abbaye de St. Vivant, where monks planted vines a thousand years ago.

\*

The *climats* have now been granted UNESCO heritage status. Driving at different times of the day up Route Nationale 974 you start to understand how the light hits different parcels and terroirs along the Côte d'Or. It is incredible how so much conversation is generated by such tiny differences. I think of Jerusalem, of three religions squashed into the same small patch of land.

Winemakers invite us to put on warm jackets before we go into their cellars. We are tasting from plots marked purple (*grand cru*) and pink (*premier cru*) on the map of the Côte d'Or. We swirl and spit and return the wine from the bottom of the glass straight back into the barrel. We descend into cellars beneath the best terroirs in the world.

At Domaine Conte Georges de Vogüë, which has stood on this site since the 1400s, the winemaker opens the bung on the top of each barrel. We descend deeper into this world. Nick talks about the geology as we make our way along the Côte d'Or. He points out one of the *combes*, the valleys that run through the bedrock, as we look up from Frédéric Mugnier's doorstep, the trees on the hilltop throwing context onto the land below.

We follow Mugnier down into the cellar. He started life as an offshore engineer and is a fifth-generation winemaker. Bill Nanson's *The Finest Wines of Burgundy* says that his Chambolle-Musigny Premier Cru Les Fuées 'manages to dance the line between rippling muscle and smoothness of texture.' We observe the dance between tannin and acidity, between fruit and oak, between characteristics described as masculine and feminine. Wine swirls from the barrel to the glass. The wines resemble samples of blood; we line up as though waiting to receive rather than to give blood.

Nanson writes of the Musigny Grand Cru: 'this is a fabled piece of land, and Frédéric Mugnier manages to capture it in his bottles: a wine of depth, concentration, and intensity, yet wrapped in the silken glove of Musigny.' They are, he says, 'very lovely bottles at any age... But for the transcendental, you will have to let them sleep for at least 20 years.'

The samples swirl around the glass; we join in the race to the spittoon. We observe as the remains are tipped back into the barrel. The wine drips into the oak like blood stains. The bung is replaced into the barrel as if to staunch the bleeding.

\*

We stop at Clos Vougeot. Someone produces baguettes and cheese. Someone passes around sheets written a language I cannot read. Dean Shaw, winemaker to Sam Neill, leads the singing. The château at Clos Vougeot stands in the background, the site where the Cistercians made their wine. In a month's time the Confrerei des Tastevins will gather here to celebrate the harvest.

I watch John Saker and Alan Brady and his partner Rosie and Chris Keys, the winemaker at Gibbston Valley. They start off hesitantly. I watch in the autumn sun alongside Andrea Mills, an Australian writer as they repeat and repeat, each iteration becoming a little more fluent. I stay silent, the Maori lyrics in my hand. They are singing *Pōkarekare ana*, a New Zealand love song, sung during World War One by Maori soldiers; it was a love song, either an expression of loss, the love of a sweetheart, or home, or place itself.

\*

Nick's mother, Lois, widow of Rolfe Mills, one of the pioneers of Otago Pinot, lives here for six months of the year. Lois takes John Sakar and his cameraman in her car so that the cortege of vans doesn't have to stop each time a photograph presents itself.

We press on, descending deeper into terroir itself. We listen to the sound of place, laughter echoing off cellar walls. We step backwards and forwards to get out of shots as Sakar's cameraman makes his way around the cellars; stand here, not there, and I think too that this is terroir, the smallest of steps differentiating parcels of land: here, not there.

We meet Musigny, the vineyard dog at Domaine Ghislaine Barthou. We follow Ghislaine into the cellar, cut into the rock of Chambolle to taste wines made from eleven different parcels of vines, including the aptly named Les Charmes. Nanson writes, 'all wines from Chambolle should be "charming," but Ghislaine makes hers from 70-year-old vines, delivering a wine of tension and energy.' Nanson says 'All Charmes are not the same'.

The bung is pulled from barrel after barrel. Wine spills down the outside of the oak, so that the barrels themselves resemble the patchwork of viticultural maps, of the *premiers* and *grands crus* sites represented in stains of pinks and purples.

Cobwebs climb over everything; I am surprised by the mould on the walls. I find the cellars a little frightening, as though we are beyond reach. I wonder if we called out would anyone hear us.

\*

Sparks shoot out as the oak is toasted over flames at the cooperage. We stand over the fire as though we are making camp. Coopers lift barrels as though they are weightless, they twirl across the floor like ballet dancers. We see stacks of staves that make up the barrels and from the side they resemble gold bars.

Trees stretch before us as we make our way through the forest at Cîteaux. The monastery lies beyond these trees. The driver checks the numbers pinned up onto the trees, as if he is looking for a parking space. A sign reads *Forêt Domaniale de Cîteaux 275*. We come to a stop.

The forest ranger strides ahead until we get to the site. We stand among trees hundreds of feet overhead. The tree is identified. It falls quickly; we hear the sound of collateral damage as twigs and branches fall in its wake.

The tree lies at our feet, a sacrament of sorts. It feels as though an animal has been sacrificed. It lies like a safari animal that has been shot. I wonder what if it was the wrong tree. It feels for a moment as though I might weep. Oaks stand around us, observing. This oak will receive the wine, the cycle will continue on for centuries.

The sound of the saw starts up. The tree trunk looks as though it has been carved from the inside. There is moss on the bark, like beard growth that continues post mortem. I stand up on the tree stump, wood shaving sprinkled around my feet. The bark has been sprayed in red lettering, like a condemned sheep. I think of pre-operative markings to guide the surgeon. There is lettering sprayed like graffiti art, a white flourish, then a green circle, then a smaller circle in orange. I don't know what these markings mean.

We gather closer as the ranger talks about the history of the forest and the conservation scheme; branches lean in around us. Many of the leaves have fallen; those that remain sit like brightly coloured birds catching the sun.

Twigs snap underfoot as we make our way back out to the road. The leaves are illuminated in late afternoon sun, waving like prayer flags.

The cameraman bundles his kit into Lois's Citroën 2CV and John Sakar, standing at six and a half foot (a professional basketball player in a previous incarnation) folds himself into the back seat like flat pack furniture.

\*

I find an edition of the *World of Fine Wine* in Atheneum bookshop in the centre of Beaune. I open it to find one of my own poems, dedicated to Alan Brady and written for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

It sounds a little childish to admit it, but I am thrilled to find my work here, in one of the finest wine bookshops in the world. I found my work in Atheneum, I say to Andrea, the Australian writer at dinner. So did I, she says. So did I, says Elaine Chuckan Brown, the American writer who draws her tasting notes. *You writers*, says one of the winemakers, teasing, but not unkindly. This, I think, is our terroir. The winemakers' mark is made through vintages; our window on the world is made up of words.

## **Godfather of the Gibbston**

*for Alan Brady*

A helicopter hovers overhead,  
traffic snakes around the valley floor.  
*We're on the left once you pass the bluff,*

you said. Vines flash past the window,  
vines aged thirty years and upwards.  
*I wouldn't put those in there,*

you heard (or didn't hear) like directions  
from a farmer frowning in the car window,  
*Now, I wouldn't start out from here,*

but in they went, the first  
of the Pinot, into a valley that had seen  
nothing since the miners left: wild, inhospitable

land that knew (but didn't know it knew)  
about altitude, diurnal variation,  
the refraction of light on schist.

You watch over the tasting room  
at Gibbston Valley: Le Maître,  
a portrait in pen and ink

as the pourer points me back  
towards the Drumlin. Black lab  
at our feet, bottles at our elbow,

we work our way through fragrant  
feminine years, through dried herbs  
and floral notes: this is what it means

to taste geography. In Beaune  
we trail behind wide wheels  
of tiny tractors with hoses hanging

in their wake. We put our ear  
to the snap and the crackle  
of malolactic fermentation;

we watch the proboscis penetrate  
the barrel as though drawing blood.  
A portrait: a procession of winemakers

observing the feast of St Vincent  
(that could be Sir John Lavery's  
*Twelfth of July in Portadown*) observes

us swirling, spitting, our feet on the stone  
floor, laughter echoing off the cellar walls  
as we chart our progress on the patchwork

of pinks and purples, the grands  
and premiers crus, my notes  
a complicated fusion of French

and English as I footstep the Master  
through the vines, a passenger  
on your pilgrimage. You talk of the lie

of the land from Down  
to Dunedin, from Gibbston Valley  
to Mount Edward to The Wild Irishman,

the Three Colleens lined up along  
the kitchen counter, and you say,  
*When you close a door behind you, close it gently.*

## Chapter 24

### Earth to Earth

We make our way on foot towards the cross that stands over the vineyards at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. I first came to this pilgrim site in 2013. I had set my black New Zealand Pinot Fest bag at the foot of the cross. Today I am here with the winemakers of Otago. The usual suspects of Central Otago are backed up against the most revered wall in the world of wine, the men from Rippon and Felton Road, from Mount Difficulty and Prophet's Rock.

We are getting closer and closer to terroir itself.

We are invited to lunch at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. Nick Mills has warned us: no one is to make a fuss about meeting Aubert de Villaine. No selfies, he said. Shake his hand and look him in the eye like a Kiwi. And so it is as a temporary New Zealander that I will meet de Villaine. He is a quiet man, tall, a little over eighty. He is wearing an open-necked shirt with a few pens in the breast pocket and a moss coloured jacket. His eyebrows are slightly bushy, with strands of grey. He has hazel eyes and I think they have a quiet intelligence. Who was that we were talking to? asks the winemaker beside me. I say, that was Aubert de Villaine.

The benches are set for lunch; this is the room where they celebrate the end of harvest. The room is crowded with Burgundian winemakers. De Villaine's signature is on the bottles poured as an aperitif: Bâtard-Montrachet, 2014, Propriétaire à Vosne-Romanée. The label says 302 bottles were harvested. I can't bring myself to write a tasting note.

The New Zealand ambassador is talking in fluent French about the exchange between winemakers; the vines are reaching up the hill in the mural behind him. Nick is talking about the shared learning that has been exchanged between Burgundy and Otago. He is talking about a call to prayer, communion wine. He talks of the concept of terroir, not just in vines but also in culture. He is talking about the Maori



concept *au niveau de terroir chez vous*, of a place to stay, a place to put your feet, a place where you feel good.

He explains the roots of the Maori song before Dean Shaw leads off. The Burgundians follow. Songs celebrating nationality or nationalism never turn out so well in my homeland, but here, they are celebratory.

Bottles are passed up and down the table. Gibbston Valley *Le Maître* sits beside Bâtard-Montrachet. I think of Sam Neill's words at the Pinot Fest about the bastards of Burgundy expelled from the Big House. Jean-Michel Jacob of Domaine Lucien Jacob is holding up his Musigny-Vergelesse *Premier Cru* 2015, in his right hand, *Le Maître* in his left; *le maître's* partner Rosie sits at his left hand.

No one wants to leave.

We finish on Bonnes-Mares, *Grand Cru*, Domaine Comte Georges de Vogüé, Chambolle-Musigny, 2001, from the cellar we stood in a few days ago. The winemaker beside me says, I can't remember what I was doing in 2001, but this wine remembers.

\*

We stand in the Salle des Rois, on the first floor of the Hôtel Dieu at the Hospices de Beaune. In a month's time the Hospices will host Christie's auction, which will inform prices for the vintage. The charity auction has been run at the Hospices since the mid nineteenth century. The last time I was here I bought a ticket with the other tourists. The Hospices was founded in 1443 as a charitable hospital for the poor. Patients used to sleep two to a bed. As part of the museum display, the beds are dressed in deep red blankets, the red of cardinals' robes.

The Dukes of Burgundy are following us around the room, their portraits hung on wallpaper in a repeating motif of Fleur de Lys over French navy. I read the gold lettering on the portraits. Jean San Peur, Duc de Bourgogne has his hands joined in

prayer. He was assassinated in 1419. Philippe le Bon Duc de Bourgogne is wearing a gold crown; his cheeks are rouged below the eyes.

A whiteboard sits under the portraits with map of the globe in watercolours of mauve and grey, purple and mustard; it looks like a representation of an incoming storm. This map is Nick's representation of Burgundian and Otago terroir.

The French flag is planted on the upper west side of the globe, and under it the words *calcaire, terroir, sédimentaire, clime, appellation, parcellaire, age, introspection, cartographie*.

A map of New Zealand is sketched on the upper right quadrant of the board and beneath it, the words, schist, metamorphic, wild, regionality, subregionality, glaciation, youth, pioneers, extrovert, and one word in the middle in Maori, *Turangawaewae*, where you make your home.

The wines of Otago are set out on barrels. I take up a glass. I taste *Le Maître*. There is spice and bramble, heading towards blackcurrant, there is a flash of liquorice and I find my gums pulsating afterwards. Felton Road Calvert '15 has a savoury note on the nose. I think of hedgerow and loganberry as I taste; it keeps unfolding like a petal.

Burgundian winemakers circulate around the room. I meet an Australian winemaker called Jane Eyre. I meet a New Zealand student at college in Dijon who plays rugby for Nuits-St-Georges. This man, says Alan, will be the first Tongan winemaker in New Zealand.

I can see the mustard coloured tiles through the pale ruby wine swirling around the bottom of the glass. This is Nick's wine, Rippon '12. It has deep black cherry, still in outline, still developing. Rippon's Tinker's Field '12 is softer and redder on the nose; there is red cherry on the palate; it is concentrated, yet you can see through to the tiles at the same time. There is a quiet but insistent whisper on the length.

I stop when I get to Emma's Block '09. These grapes were still on the vine when I started out on this path, when I stood in the vineyard at Rippon looking down into Lake Wanaka.

There is coffee on the nose, it is promising. I taste it again. Raspberry, a little smoke and mocca, a sour sweetness, sour cherry, red cherry, long and quiet, a little hint of spice. Nick is talking of terroir as a place to stay, and still I can taste the mocca in the mouth, it is linear, rather than unfolding; it goes on and on, in a quiet whisper.

I move on to Rudi's barrel. I tell him that the grapes that made this wine were on the vines when I first set out. He says, who do you think planted those vines? I planted those with Rolfe, he says. These are the vines that produced the wines that Rudi took two days to talk through with Schuster: his first five barrels.

I talk to Lois, Rolfe's widow. She says she has lived here quietly, part of the fabric of the community up in the hills. I'm ready to go home now, she says. I'm ready to get on with the next chapter of my life.

The last of the barrels is rolled out, then lifted out across the doorframe like war wounded. Lois is splendid in a New Zealand greenstone necklace and mustard beret, her movements gracious, graceful, her feet dainty in black flats. She is chasing the Hoover across the floor, almost waltzing its wake, leaning backwards in laughter, fluent, fluid, following an invisible dance partner.

\*

After the tasting a few of us climb into the car with Rudi. We drive north. We stop at traffic lights in Nuits-St-Georges. There is scaffolding up over a roof where they are reconstructing the patterned mosaic of the yellows and reds and blacks of the Hospices de Beaune. Vineyards flash by, orange and gold and burgundy, as though they are in motion rather than us.

Three ducks cross our path at Ladoix-Serigny.

We pull in beyond a sign that says *Route Barée*, and we walk. Golden vines spill up the hillside. We stand over an exposed pipe to see the depth of the roots. We climb up on the wall over Les Amoureuses; we look down into the red clay of Les Bonnes Mares; we look into Les Fuets. The odd bunch of grapes is still hanging, like clusters of blackberries. The fields around us look like they have been stitched into the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

The vines at Les Charmes stretch out like snakes and ladders.

Andrea pulls out a smartphone and waves it around the vines like a metal detector. There is an app that identifies individual *climats*; they appear on the screen, the pinks and purples of the *premiers* and *grands crus*. I think of the app as a magnifying glass or a monocle, or a compass guiding our path. Perhaps it is a kaleidoscope as the *climats* replicate and divide beyond our comprehension.

\*

A goat is roasting over an open fire at Échevronne. Jean-Michel Jacob and his wife are hosting a *méchoi*. Tables have been set up; bottles from Burgundy and Central Otago sit on top of a wooden wine press. As the sky darkens, lights illuminate the bottles and we put on more layers.

A jazz band is playing. The double bass player has climbed up onto a wooden bench. Allan Meadows, an American writer with power to move wine markets, known as the Burghound, sits at his feet. There is clapping and whooping under this corrugated roof in the hills over the Côte d'Or.

Two barrels have been especially commissioned to commemorate the exchange; each of us has marked the wood with our signatures.

The bottles stacked up on the wine press remind me of coconuts at a tombola shy. A magnum of Musigny rubs shoulders with Felton Road Cornish Point 2016. Morey-Saint-Denis Les Crais 2015 stands by Mount Difficulty, Rippon stands in the

background. The Flying Winemaker, Michelle Richardson's Pinot stands among them. Quartz Reef stands by Prophet's Rock.

The musicians are wearing bow ties and dinner jackets. One of them is bent double over a metal washboard worn over his torso, clanging a klaxon and a small cymbal. The double bass player's jacket has come off. We are pouring a magnum of Chambolle-Musigny *Premier Cru* 2007. There is clapping and cheering as the song repeats. The Burghound's arms are upstretched to the musician overhead; the musicians are reaching out to each other as though high-fiving through the air.

\*

I can hear the rain against the roof as I pack my things away. Yesterday the weather almost broke on the way back from the Abbaye de St. Vivant. That visit was the culmination of the celebrations, the pilgrimage back to the site where the monks planted their vines in the hills. Leaves had begun to fall as soon as the celebration was over.

It had been a bit of a journey across the mountains to the Hautes Côtes. Vans began to tilt upwards; we got out and walked the final stage. The abbey has been restored and is a UNESCO heritage site.

The light had cast shadows across the white dust of the floor. Nick's children were running towards the doors, their hair back lit by the sun, like ghosts of the future.

I must have moved my hand when I took a shot of de Villaine as he addressed the group; the ground looked like it was spinning, the electric light behind him became a full moon.

I got onto my knees to get the ground into the shot as the Kiwis prepared to sing for the last time. I was almost prostrate, paying homage to the Cistercians, the Burgundians, the New Zealanders, to this terroir and the people singing into the stones.

Matt Dicey of Mount Difficulty had stood front and centre, as though he might at any moment step forward to begin the Haka. The New Zealand delegation lined up across the stone wall, like Maori warriors preparing to set down the frond as a symbol of friendship. Dean Shaw had started the signing; the walls had echoed, a form of call and response.

It was a ritual, an exchange of vows between Burgundy and Central Otago within the abbey walls; it was like vespers, as though psalms were sung. It was as though they were saying grace, giving thanks.

I took a moment to myself and walked through the empty rooms. I thought about the monks who lived here. I wondered what they sang, what they drank. I thought about these men who left their mark, their pawprint on this land, as Jefford had termed *terroir*.

I thought of all of us here, trying to follow this path. Strangely, it seemed more spiritual standing as part of the group. I moved back to join Alan and Rosie, my adoptive New Zealand parents. I thought of us celebrating vintages and feting winemakers; of honouring the work of those who went before us. I thought of honouring our ancestors.

I migrated across to the table. I stood beside the Flying Winemaker. De Villaine was in the background (but the focus of the shot) as we had a photograph taken, so that it did not constitute a technical breach of the injunction against selfies.

I observed de Villaine as he poured bottles vinified from the neighbouring vineyard at St. Vivant. His eyes danced as he spoke. He opened the bottles, as he poured, his gesture of offering, *servez vous*.

We waited for the wine like communicants.

I watched de Villaine wait as the last of the group left the Abbaye de Saint Vivant. I watched as he closed the doors behind him, a custodian of the land.

\*

Last night we had talked about the journey home; some were on the way to host Meet the Winemaker dinners in China and South East Asia. Someone was deciding how far into the long-haul flight he should take a sleeping tablet. We talked about how we divide our time. I thought of my journeys back and forth across the Irish Sea, about the customs lady who looked at my passport in Auckland, and said, welcome back.

Rudi had made an earring of a black and white pin of the fern, the symbol of New Zealand in one ear, and the French flag in the other; he looked like someone ready to run away with the circus. Someone said, I'll probably die somewhere over the Indian Ocean.

\*

Outside the rain is becoming more insistent. I am afraid the rain will wash the remnants of St. Vivant from my boots: earth back to earth.

I wonder if I need to order a taxi. A text message comes through, we are in the square, come and join us. When I get to the café, Champagne has been ordered. Croque Messieurs are on the way.

The carousel in the square is closed for the winter season. It is still raining as the car pulls out of Place de Carnot. I know it will wash the dust off my feet. I think of the remains of the wine poured back into barrels as we tasted in the cellars around Musigny. There is something sacramental about earth being returned to earth.

When we get to the station, Alan and Rosie stand on the other side of the track; they are heading south to Lyon. The train pulls in and they are gone from view.

I see bare vines backlit by the sun as we reverse out of Beaune, like courtiers retreating.

I see vineyards made up of lines of gold flowing up the hillside.

I think of the pioneers and pilgrims, all of them singing of love of the land. I think of the delicate, complicated dance of terroir, the engagement between man and the land itself. I think of Lolo's skirt almost billowing up in frames at the cooperage, I think of her dancing with the hoover (an invisible dance partner) across the floor at the Hospices de Beaune after the last of the barrels had been wheeled out.

I think of the face of de Villaine, quiet, sincere, insistent. I can almost see my own father, and the memory of ancestors in his eyes. It feels, I had written in my diary, as though this man is a human expression of terroir itself.

I think of terroir as a form of music or religion or communion.

I think of it as a form of love.

I think about those barrels being rolled off railway lines that have drawn to a halt, about memory itself maturing in those oak barrels, resting on the shoulder of giants.

I think of the whole business, a feast of the senses, sound and light and texture and taste, aroma and flavour, of knowledge itself.

I think of the sounds and the sights of terroir, the tasting and the talking, how it seemed as though we had come closer to understanding the fall of light along the Côte de Nuits. I think of the complicated pattern of *climats*, of how this knowledge or understanding too would wear off, like a language not spoken often enough.

I think of all of us, pioneers, pilgrims. I think of the beginnings of terroir itself. I wonder if terroir itself came into view for a brief moment, an eclipse.

I think of how we drew closer and closer; spiralling closer to the centre until the threads disappeared back into the earth.

I watch Clos Vougeot disappear into the distance.



We change trains at Dijon; when we get to Paris we will go our separate ways.

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## **Critical Essay:**

### **Tracing Place: A Study of the Literature of Land Reclaimed**

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